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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 16.03.2011 www.osw.waw.pl

Elections in Russian regions: the ‘party of power’ succeeds in maintaining its dominance

On 13 March, local elections were held at various levels (including 12 regional parliaments) in 74 regions of Russia. These may be regarded as a test before December’s elections to the Duma. All the elections were won by the ‘party of power’, United Russia, although the scale of its victory is clearly less than before. At the same time, the conduct of the elections showed that the authorities have been able to compensate for this fall in support by the use of various instruments of pressure and manipulation.

United Russia won around 70% of the seats in all the regional legislatures, although this was only possible thanks to the results in single-seat districts, as their results were weaker than in previous years in voting on party lists. In many regions, United Russia’s results ranged between 30% and 40% (in the Kirov region it was 36.7%, in Tver 39.8%) or slightly more than 40% (Orenburg 41.5%, Kaliningrad 42.2%, Nizhny Novgorod 42.9%, etc.). However, the results were higher than before for United Russia’s rivals the Communists, as for For a Just Russia, a party which is close to some of the ruling class (and which won over 20% in some regions). Observers recorded numerous violations, including multiple voting on the basis of absentee ballot, and a clear bias in the media in favour of United Russia’s candidates.

United Russia’s weaker results in the contested districts may indicate that public support for the party is beginning to fall. This may be due to fatigue and the mobilisation of the opposition – both the Communists and the democrats (who called for voters to participate in the elections, but vote for any party other than United Russia). At the same time, these elections have shown that the authorities still have sufficient administrative potential to compensate for the ‘party of power’s’ weaker support with assistance from the bureaucracy, the media, and various types of electoral tampering. <JR>