

Regional elections in Russia: Moscow versus the regions

Jadwiga Rogoża, Wybory regionalne w Rosji: Moskwa kontra regiony

On 8 September local elections were held in most regions of Russia, including elections of governors, regional legislatures and city mayors. While most regions saw strong victories for government candidates, in several cities with traditions of social activity (such as Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, Krasnoyarsk and Novgorod), this trend was broken by outright victories for, or good showings by independent candidates. On 8 September local elections were held in most regions of Russia, including elections of governors, regional legislatures and city mayors. While most regions saw strong victories for government candidates, in several cities with traditions of social activity (such as Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, Krasnoyarsk and Novgorod), this trend was broken by outright victories for, or good showings by independent candidates. The biggest surprise came in the election for mayor of Moscow; despite the victory for the Kremlin's candidate Sergei Sobyenin in the first round (51.4%), the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny polled surprisingly highly (27.2%), which has strengthened his status as the main opposition leader.

The regional elections once again showed the differences between the political involvement of the communities in active cities and those in the more 'inert' regions, which are the majority in Russia. In these regions – passive, focused on day-to-day problems – the political processes are top-down, and the local authorities monitor the electoral processes closely and are able to guarantee their re-election. But gaps are beginning to appear in the Kremlin's control over elections, which indicates growing public pressure and an increase in demand for pluralism in politics. At the forefront of this trend are those cities with a more developed civil society, in which relatively competitive and fair elections have taken place. And despite the numerical superiority of 'passive Russia,' it is worth emphasising that it is Moscow and some other active cities that are setting the political trends, and these are the places where the future of Russia's political system will be determined.

The government is winning in the regions

The elections were held in 80 of Russia's 83 provinces; eight regions elected governors, 17 regional parliaments, elections for mayor were held in 8 cities, and city councils in a further 12. The overwhelming majority of regions saw victories for candidates or parties associated with the local government, or the 'party of power' United Russia; as is now traditional, the party won record support in Chechnya (86%). United Russia candidates also won the

mayoral elections in most cities, including Vladivostok. The opposition party RPR/Parnas only entered parliament in the Yaroslavl region (where the well-known opposition figure Boris Nemtsov won a seat).

The election was held under the amended electoral laws, which effectively support government-linked candidates and parties. Firstly, the liberalisation of the law on political parties has led to a surge in the number of groups which have only marginal support, as well as those which act as so-called 'spoilers', deliberately using names confusingly similar to the names of opposition parties in the elections; one example is the Communists of Russia or the Communist Party of Social Justice (with a misleading abbreviation KPSS), which in many regions took several percent of the votes from the official Communist Party of the Russian Federation. This effectively split the vote; most of the competing parties did not pass the electoral threshold, which experts calculate at about 30-40% of the total vote. This in turn significantly improved the results of the electoral favourite, United Russia, which took over a large part of these votes when the seats were distributed (according to data from the party, it will thus gain an average of 77%). Secondly, the regional elections were moved to the second Sunday in September, which made it difficult for the opposition to prepare – the main part of the campaign took place in the summer, when interest in politics (which is low anyway) decreases yet further. This meant that the elections were characterised by a very low turnout (20-30%); this is traditionally considered to be a factor which favours the 'correction' of the results by the authorities.

'Rebellious' regions

The most interesting fact, however, was the gaps in the overall trend of the government keeping strict control over the election process. In the city of Yekaterinburg in the Urals, the independent candidate Yevgeny Roizman won the mayoral election; he is a charismatic local activist who for years had been waging an effective, though controversial fight against drug abuse in the region. And in Petrozavodsk (the capital of Karelia) Galina Shirshina was elected mayor; she was supported by the Yabloko party. In several other cities, United Russia won relatively low percentages of votes: in Novgorod, which is seen as the historical cradle of Russian democracy, it won only 27% of the vote in elections to the city council, and in Krasnoyarsk, after all the seats were assigned, the 'party of power' was beaten by the Patriots of Russia party, led by the local businessman Anatoly Bykov. Finally, the opposition leader Aleksei Navalny got a surprisingly high result in the elections for mayor of Moscow, winning 27.2% of the vote. In the aforementioned cities, which are characterised by a more developed civil society, the government decided not to interfere too radically in the elections; the opposition candidates were not excluded from the elections at the registration stage, and there was no electoral manipulation on a mass scale. Nevertheless some violations did take place; TV stations actively promoted government candidates, and led campaigns to discredit independent candidates.

Moscow in the vanguard of change

Most attention has focused on the mayoral elections in Moscow, which are *de facto* elections of federal importance, significant for the further development of both the Russian ruling elite and the opposition. The mayor was elected by universal suffrage for the first time in ten years (previously, the post had been appointed by the president), and the elections were competitive and relatively fair. Making that impression was the aim of the race favourite, the incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who is beginning to be seen as an important player in the context of the possible succession to Vladimir Putin. Sobyenin therefore sought to strengthen his electoral legitimacy by a relatively clean campaign, as well as by the participation in the elections of his main rival Aleksei Navalny (who was released from jail after a conviction in the first instance). It should be noted that even though mass electoral fraud was absent, there were various forms of interference in the elections: a disproportionately high percentage of votes was cast for Sobyenin in some constituencies, which may indicate ballot stuffing (experts estimate the scale of this at 1-2%). Another form of pressure on Navalny came from his conviction in the first instance (the announcement of a final verdict is expected in the second half of September).

Another argument for a 'clean' campaign is that Sobyenin could afford to be confident of victory; at the start of the campaign his support was running close to 70%, while Navalny only polled around 3%. The government's intention was for the elections to seal Navalny's marginal status as an opposition politician, who even in the most liberal city in Russia would have been unable to win more than 10-15% of the vote. However, Navalny's performance came as an unpleasant surprise for the government: he conducted a dynamic and modern campaign, in contrast to the static campaign run by the incumbent mayor, and did not shy away from the fierce political battle, attacking the representatives of the ruling elite, including Sobyenin himself. Navalny was supported by a staff consisting of around 14,000 young volunteers. He enjoyed considerable support from business leaders; his campaign was supported by some business representatives (including Vladimir Ashurkov, the ex-manager of Alfa Group; and Sergei Guriev, a member of the supervisory board of Sberbank and a former rector of the Russian Economic University), and the meetings Navalny organised in Moscow were attended by representatives from major Russian and foreign financial groups. As a result, support for Navalny rose substantially over the last few months, and the mobilisation of his supporters in a low turnout in Moscow gave him an unexpectedly high result – more than 27%.

Navalny's campaign and his result are pushing him from the position of a popular social activist to the level of a serious politician who has an opportunity to represent the interests of that part of the public which is frustrated at the lack of political representation – business, the middle class, the younger generation of voters. These groups are interested in strengthening competition in the economy and politics, the depoliticisation and deregulation of the economy, strengthening public control over the government, and a real fight against corruption. Navalny's electorate may be further broadened by the pragmatism he demonstrated before the elections; he toned down his previously quite harsh nationalist rhetoric, and demonstrated an ability to win support from the business classes. The election results have put the Kremlin in a dilemma as to what to do next about him; his sentence in

the second instance will no doubt be a political decision taken at the highest level. The Kremlin finds itself in a situation where any decision they take will have negative consequences; a jail sentence will activate Navalny's supporters and bring criticism from abroad, whereas a suspended sentence will enable him to further develop his political career (he has already announced the formation of a national political movement).

Conclusions

The elections in Moscow and several other major cities have shown that the changing social structure is starting to be reflected in the electoral process, and is fostering the emergence of new contenders for power. As yet, these changes are not undermining the domination of the Kremlin, which has a number of means of controlling the electoral process. However, these social changes pose new challenges and dilemmas for the government, including how to act against the new political forces. The tactics adopted by the Kremlin in recent years (penalising various forms of opposition activity, bringing criminal cases against opposition leaders) have been of limited efficacy – after a period of demobilisation, the opposition mobilises again, particularly in time for elections. The Russian electoral calendar will favour a resurgence of the opposition electorate and an increase in splits among the ruling elite; in a year elections will be held to the Moscow city council, in 2016 parliamentary elections will be held in Russia, and 2018 will see the presidential elections.

The Kremlin may see the course and outcome of the elections in Moscow as an experiment which backfired on it: the government's strong belief that Sobyanin would win (as the polls had predicted) led it to hold competitive and relatively fair elections. However, it transpired that support for Sobyanin among a large part of the electorate was merely passive: despite many of his followers claiming they would vote for him, they simply failed to turn out, in contrast to the enthusiasm of the opposition. Public support for Vladimir Putin (while still high) is characterised by a similar passivity; his supporters often need to be mobilised by top-down methods to participate in rallies supporting the president. For the Kremlin, this may be another argument that 'manual control' of elections and other political processes is still essential. For the opposition, the Moscow elections, which were attended by thousands of observers, represent an argument that they need to mobilise and institutionalise their activity.

The regional elections once again confirmed Russia's diversity in social terms – electoral activity, civic awareness, the public's expectations of the government. This is a 'two-speed Russia': the large cities and regional centres, which have a developed social fabric, and where a need for pluralism in politics is growing, are clearly distinct from the regions of 'inertia', centrally governed by the authorities, where the electoral process is anything but competitive and transparent. This 'passive' Russia has a large numerical advantage. However, many past events have shown that the major trends in Russian politics are not determined by the provinces, even though they have the advantage of numbers, but by the biggest, most active cities, led by Moscow. This has been confirmed by the developments of the last two years: the Moscow protests in December 2011 provided the impetus to start the erosion of the political stability which had prevailed in Russia over the previous decade.