

ties in the opposition are oppressed and their activity is effectively blocked by the authorities. Essentially, the local authorities have established de facto political censorship. There are no public debates, the opposition has no access to the media, and there are illegal limits on conducting demonstrations and other forms of mass protest. Frequently, the authorities replace local party heads with leaders who are more loyal and dependent. To achieve these ends, the regional authorities provide extensive resources for party branches, including office space, communications, and help in finding jobs for party activists.

The national leaderships of political parties frequently ignore the manipulations by local authorities in the regional and local party organizations, hoping

to receive in exchange more votes in the elections, which are effectively controlled by the local authorities. In these conditions, only political structures that are inclined to conform, compromise, and make agreements with the authorities continue to survive.

In these conditions, it is not surprising that society has little interest in parties that have not made an agreement with the authorities, but at the same time distanced themselves from the radical opposition. Yabloko is characteristic in this regard. The party is going through some of the most difficult times in its history, losing elections and facing the opposition of the authorities. The same is happening to other parties: they simply must marginalize themselves in order to survive.

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Regional Report

Elections in Komi: A Sign of Future Victory or Defeat?

By Yury Shabaev, Syktyvkar

Abstract

A detailed analysis of the March 11 elections in Komi shows that United Russia and Just Russia did not do as well as they could have and that others parties made gains. Surprisingly, the result may be a more active republican legislature.

Elections Boost All Parties

On March 11, 2007, Komi was one of 14 regions to hold elections to its regional legislature. A detailed analysis of the results in this region suggest that the outcome was not completely predictable and that the mood of the electorate could change by December, when the federal legislative elections will be held.

One way to look at the Komi elections is that everybody won. The biggest winner was the governor and the executive branch, which actively supported United Russia (UR), and saw its victory as a vote of confidence. UR itself won the most votes, gaining 36.4 percent. The opposition parties also won because neither the Communists (14.2%), nor the LDPR (13.6%), nor the Union of Right Forces (8.9%) had been represented in the local parliament previously and the degree of their support within the population was significant. Just Russia also won, gaining 15.8 percent in its political debut.

The population also won, though to a lesser degree, because the republican parliament will likely represent the interests of various social and territorial groups. There is reason to hope that the opposition will force the majority to stop simply rubber stamping the decisions of the executive and actually begin to monitor its actions. Potentially, there will be hearings on difficult social issues and state programs, such as developing villages, and investigations of difficult situations, such as the need to address the poverty of the mining cities of Inta and Vorkuta. The population will likely support such initiatives by the legislature.

Parties of Power Lag

The authorities backing UR could not use their strategic superiority to full effect. They had announced that they would take 50 percent of the vote, but did not reach this self-imposed goal. Polling results show that only hard-core UR supporters voted

for the party. The party could not attract any fence-sitters, all of whom went to the other parties. This outcome demonstrated the weakness of the party's regional organization. UR's weak ability to appeal to the masses and its opponents' ability to neutralize its use of administrative resources could lead to a quick erosion in the party's political influence. The party's success in Komi reflects Putin's popularity more than the success of the local authorities.

Just Russia likewise conducted an ineffective campaign. It did not carry out aggressive work with the socially disadvantaged groups of the population who have strongly negative attitudes toward the authorities. Among them are pensioners, public sector workers, rural residents, and miners. Recent polls show that the population has low regard for all institutes of power. Of 13 mayors running for reelection on March 11, only 5 were able to hang on to their jobs.

Thanks to Just Russia's poor campaign and the absence of the "against all" line on the ballot, the protest vote largely went to the Communists and the Union of Right Forces (SPS). Accordingly, these parties' success cannot be attributed to their campaigns. The Communists have never had much support or distinguished leaders in the republic. Nevertheless, they did well in the elections. SPS has not been particularly active in Komi in recent years. Only the arrival and participation of Nikita Belykh, the party leader, helped boost its image during the campaign.

Voters Seek Alternatives

The voters demonstrated a high level of political consciousness and did not want to vote for the two parties of power simultaneously. They sought to

punish the authorities for their poor policy. In the previous parliament, of the 28 active deputies, 15 were members of United Russia at the end of its term. In the new parliament, United Russia will control 18 seats. Most of the success for United Russia was in the single-mandate districts. Many tricks were used in the district voting. In many cases, the voters were deprived of a real choice. In one Syktyvkar district, six candidates were originally registered, but only two actually made it on to the ballot. One was the United Russia candidate and the other was a person completely unknown to the local population. In Usinsk, the president of LUKoil-Komi ran against an ordinary worker in the oil industry. In the Magistral district, opponents of the UR candidate called on the voters to support her rather than themselves.

What will block United Russia from strengthening its position in the coming months? It must fulfill the promises that it made to the voters before the elections. The main issues are the difficult social and economic problems of the republic's mining cities and its rural areas. It is unlikely that the situation will improve much in the months before the December elections.

Clearly, the political battle in Komi did not come to an end after the elections. In these conditions, it will be difficult for United Russia to maintain its leadership position. Overall, the results from Komi show that many voters want to sidestep the battle between United Russia and Just Russia and are opting for a "third way," whether it is the Communists, SPS, or Liberal Democrats. That means that there will be a more complicated distribution of political forces in the new Russian parliament.

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