

Russia holds regional elections amidst growing political crisis

By Andrea Peters
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Regional elections began Friday in Russia, with early voting starting across the country. Polls close on Sunday. Balloting is taking place in 83 regions. New governors will be chosen in 18 of these areas. Elsewhere, residents are casting votes for a variety of local representative bodies and in referendums.

The closely watched elections come as the government of President Vladimir Putin is beset by internal and external crises—mass anti-government protests in Belarus, which is the last Russian-allied state on the Russia’s western frontier, escalating tensions with Germany over the alleged poisoning of Alexei Navalny, ongoing anti-Kremlin demonstrations in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk, and the continuing spread of COVID-19.

Some of this weekend’s races are viewed as a barometer for the level of social discontent with the Kremlin, which worked in a number of regions to shore up its position by keeping opposition candidates off the ballot.

The strongest challenges to sitting governors backed by the Putin government are being mounted in of Irkutsk and Arkhangelsk, areas where there were relatively high levels of opposition to constitutional changes crafted by the Kremlin and recently passed through a nationwide popular referendum.

In the Siberian region of Irkutsk, which encompasses Lake Baikal, a Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) candidate is challenging an incumbent who was installed in office by Moscow after the previous KPRF governor, Sergey Levchenko, left in a “forced-voluntary” removal. Anger over the Kremlin’s intervention is intersecting with popular opposition to local leaders’ corruption, pollution and environmental damage in the resource-rich region. Last year, massive floods linked to climate change hit the area killing dozens and causing widespread evacuations.

In the far northern province of Arkhangelsk, similar

issues have been emerging. The current governor, Igor Orlov, has earned the disgust of the population because of his role in working with Moscow to transform an area in the ecologically sensitive region into a massive trash dump for the country’s capital.

Lead challenger is Irina Chirkova, who is from the A Just Russia (SR) party, which is identified with mass protests that erupted in 2018 and 2019 over these issues. The SR is part of the “official” or “systemic” opposition in Russia, which means that it pretends at moments to oppose the Kremlin but works hand-in-glove with it on all major questions.

Arkhangelsk was also the site of nuclear accident in 2019. An explosion at an offshore military facility caused a massive radiation spike in the region, and terrified residents bought up all available supplies of iodine in local pharmacies.

In the neighboring Komi Republic, which shares the land impacted by the proposed landfill with Arkhangelsk, it is possible that the KPRF will win the largest number of seats in the regional parliament. KPRF regional head Oleg Mikhailov supports an emerging Komi independence movement, which is tapping into anger over the maltreatment of the region’s indigenous population and discontent over economic and social conditions in the area.

The regionalist sentiments cropping up in Komi point to bigger dangers facing Moscow—the prospect that Russia could break apart along geographical lines. As popular anger towards the central government grows over poverty and inequality, local elites seek to capitalize on their control over resource-rich areas, and foreign opponents of the Kremlin pursue a policy of break-up as a means to dominate the Eurasian landmass.

In Novosibirsk, an industrial region in southern Siberia, a slew of candidates are running for regional assembly and city council seats that have been held

overwhelmingly by the ruling United Russia (UR) party and the KPRF, which is nominally an “opposition” party, but works closely with the Kremlin.

Sergei Boyko is leading an electoral coalition group called “Novosibirsk 2020,” which was set up by oppositionist Alexei Navalny. The group’s efforts are directed at putting into action so-called “smart voting,” a balloting scheme devised by Navalny to put pressure on United Russia and its political appendages. In Novosibirsk and throughout the country, Navalny’s supporters are telling people to “vote smart” by picking any candidate running against a Kremlin-backed incumbent, without any regard to the challenger’s policies and perspective.

Having identified in each of the 1,167 races happening across Russia whom people “should” vote for in order to “stop” Putin, they are throwing their support behind all and sundry, including the far right, the Stalinists, the nationalists and the pro-Western liberals.

In the southern Siberian city of Novosibirsk, where there is widespread discontent over the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic, it is possible that the efforts of Novosibirsk 2020 or other challengers in the legislative races will make a significant dent in the number of seats held by the UR and KPRF. The aim of the “smart voting” practice is to completely disorient the popular opposition towards the Kremlin welling up within the population and to take advantage of rifts within the Russian ruling elite.

Navalny’s operations may also have some impact on the election in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, where Rustam Minnikhanov is seeking another presidential term. On September 9, just two days before the start of balloting, Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) released details of its investigation into the Minnikhanov family’s real estate holdings.

The oppositionist himself has reportedly just emerged from the medically induced coma in which he was placed after falling severely ill while traveling back to Moscow from the Siberian city of Tomsk. The government of Germany, where Navalny is now being treated, has alleged Kremlin involvement in Navalny’s supposed poisoning, which the Merkel administration claims was caused by the Soviet nerve agent Novichok. Tensions between Berlin and Moscow are skyrocketing, with the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would bring further Russian energy supplies to the German market, now being called into question.

Russia’s regional elections come as the Putin

government confronts multiple crises. The alleged poisoning of Navalny has unleashed another wave of anti-Russian hysteria in the West, with heads of government and leading newspapers filled with denunciations of the Kremlin.

Moscow’s last remaining ally on its Western frontier, the Belarusian government of Aleksandr Lukashenko, continues to teeter on the brink. It is resorting to repression, violence, and arrests in an effort to stay in power. Lukashenko confronts a right-wing, pro-free-market opposition with close ties to the West, but also a mass movement from below of workers disgusted by the government’s policies.

The Kremlin is, above all, terrified that the working-class discontent finding expression in events in Belarus will erupt in Russia, where workers share similar economic and political grievances and overwhelmingly speak the same language. Recent events in Russia’s far east, where the Kremlin’s removal of an elected governor provoked mass protests in Khabarovsk, have made clear that the era of global social protest is also hitting Russia.

At the same time, coronavirus cases have topped 1 million and are once again the uptick. Moscow, like all other countries, is openly pursuing a death policy. Alexander Myasanikov, the head of the country’s coronavirus information service, told the press on Friday, “You should be glad that the number [of cases] is growing, because the more asymptomatic and mild forms, the faster we will achieve herd population immunity.”

Ordinary people, however, see the matter differently. In Volgograd, parents are objecting to the re-opening of schools, using the media to vent their opposition to forcing children into the classrooms. “I have only one question,” said one parent to a local news outlet, “Why was it necessary to open schools and kindergartens now, when there is a sharp increase in the number of infected people in the region?”

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