

United Russia Shifts Tactics for Fall Elections

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Amid worries that this summer's devastating wildfires have damaged the country's ruling tandem of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, United Russia has come up with some unusual news.

On Thursday, the ruling party announced that Novosibirsk Governor Viktor Tolokonsky would not be heading the party list for October elections to the local parliament.

Instead, the list will be headed by Tolokonsky's first deputy, Vasily Yurchenko, followed by Novosibirsk Mayor Vladimir Gorodetsky and regional parliamentary speaker Alexei Bespalikov, United Russia secretary Vyacheslav Volodin said.

Novosibirsk is not the only region where United Russia appears poised to break from its much-criticized practice of placing party card-carrying governors at the top of party lists purely to attract voters.

Six regions — including those worst-hit by this summer's wildfires and drought — and many more municipalities will go to the ballot boxes on Oct. 10, and United Russia seems determined to make up for a surprisingly poor showing in the last elections in the spring.

Jittery that discontent over the ruling elite's handling of the fires might translate into fewer votes, United Russia is sidelining prominent members in favor of lesser-known officials with deep roots in the regions, analysts said.

"Many voters are tired of seeing the same faces over and over again. And United Russia takes a very close look at opinion polls, many of which they keep secret," said Nikolai Petrov, who tracks regional politics at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

United Russia, which controls most legislatures and mayors' offices across the country, brushed aside the notion that it had anything to worry about in the October elections.

Volodin said the decision to exclude the governor from the party list in Novosibirsk was in response to criticism from the opposition that United Russia was abusing its ruling powers through the use of so-called "administrative resources."

"This way we are taking the trump card out of our opponents' hands," Volodin said in a [statement](#) published on the party's web site.

Volodin said the decision might hurt United Russia's campaign. "We know that Viktor Tolokonsky is the region's most popular politician, and if he headed the list, it would be easier for us," he said.

Putin headed United Russia's list for the 2007 State Duma elections when he was president, even though he never took a seat in the parliament and only later agreed to head the party.

United Russia also plans to exclude Magadan Governor Nikolai Dudov from its list for parliamentary elections there, national media reported. The party has not officially commented on its plans.

But United Russia has vehemently denied a report that it planned to base its campaign in at least one region on local politicians rather than Putin.

Vedomosti [reported](#) last week that opinion polls commissioned by the party in Tuva had found that Putin did more harm than good to the party's image in the impoverished South Siberian republic.

Saima Dalchin, first deputy head of United Russia's local executive committee, who was cited in the report, said in a [statement](#) two days later that she had been misquoted and that Tuva's relations with Putin were "especially warm."

The party's Tuva list is led by regional boss Sholban Kara-ool and State Duma Deputy Larisa Shoigu, sister of Tuva-born Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu — neither of whom are expected to take Tuva seats.

United Russia fared miserably in Tuva's last elections in 2006, gaining fewer seats than the Party of Life, a predecessor of its current pro-Kremlin rival A Just Russia.

But the result had less to do with party preferences than with the defection of Tuva's parliamentary speaker Vasily Oyun from United Russia to the Party of Life, said Alexander Kynev, a regional politics expert at the Foundation for Information Policy Development, a think tank.

"Tuva is a clannish society. Parties do not play much of a role here," he said.

Kynev predicted that United Russia's regional campaigns this fall would rely less on Putin than in previous years. "Putin is boring. There will be more emphasis on promoting local optimism with local affairs," he said.

Voter fatigue might result in an uphill battle for United Russia ahead of December 2011 State Duma elections. The party, which won 64 percent in the 2007 Duma elections, took a beating in the last regional polls in March, when it failed to get more than 50 percent in four regions and lost the mayoral race in Irkutsk to a Communist-backed candidate. (The mayor later joined United Russia.)

Apart from Novosibirsk, Magadan and Tuva, Oct. 10 parliamentary elections are scheduled in the Belgorod, Kostroma and Chelyabinsk regions, as well as for some 40,000 seats in municipal bodies.

Pollsters said it was too early to say what effect the devastating wildfires and toxic smog that covered much of central Russia would have on election results.

But Putin seems keen to fight any drop in his popularity, piloting a firefighting plane and driving a three-wheeled motorcycle for the cameras. He is also planning to address a regional party conference to be held in Saratov or Nizhny Novgorod next month, national media reported.

Both cities lie in the Volga Federal District, which was the most affected by the fires, and both will elect city legislatures on Oct. 10. Voters in Samara will also elect a new mayor, while Nizhny Novgorod has abolished direct mayoral elections and the job will be shared between the city's next legislative speaker and a hired "city manager."

Analysts said the October elections were hard to predict because of vast differences between the regions.

Novosibirsk is a clear case of intraparty intrigue, and the fact that Governor Tolokonsky is off the party list means that his days in office are numbered, said Kynev, from the Foundation for Information Policy Development.

Mikhail Vinogradov, a political analyst who is also an adviser to United Russia's federal executive committee, said campaigns had to differ from region to region.

"In a society that is as apolitical as ours, voters are not interested in political slogans from the federal level. They find local things more interesting," he told The Moscow Times.

Meanwhile, the opposition remained wary about any changes in United Russia's strategy.

"They cannot win without administrative resources and manipulations," said Ilya Yashin, a

leader of the Solidarity movement.

Yashin mocked an announcement Thursday by Boris Gryzlov, who heads United Russia's State Duma faction, that the party would monitor food prices in the regions.

"This is pure show," Yashin said. "As the party of power, they do not need to do any monitoring. All they need to do is order their members to control prices."

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