

Hearts Burn Ahead of Elections

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All but seven regions across the country will hold various elections this Sunday after a campaign tarnished by fraud allegations — which some underdogs even tried to counter with German heavy metal.

A total of 7,865 polls will be held in 77 of Russia's 84 regions, with about 100,000 candidates running. The count includes votes for six regional legislatures as well as mayoral elections in the regional capitals Samara and Makhachkala.

“The situation is complicated everywhere,” Lilia Shibanova, head of Golos, Russia's only independent electoral monitoring watchdog, said by telephone Thursday.

She said the ruling United Russia party has done “everything possible” to secure votes during the campaign, which makes direct vote fraud unnecessary.

About 30 million voters are expected to come to the polls, Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov said Thursday.

Some 300 polling stations will be equipped with surveillance cameras that will broadcast the voting process online, Churov said. More than half of the cameras will be installed in Dagestan, where about 1,000 polls are to be held.

President Dmitry Medvedev signed a bill Thursday ordering local authorities to provide equal access to the media for all parties, and the Interior Ministry said it would deploy 100,000 police officers to maintain peace during the elections.

But opposition supporters and independent observers remained skeptical about the authorities' pledges of fair play.

The dirtiest campaigns so far have taken place in Samara and Krasnodar, and bitter struggles are expected to intensify in Novosibirsk, Tomsk and Chelyabinsk, Shibanova said.

In Krasnodar, 31 candidates from the Communist Party withdrew from city legislature elections after four party members were denied registration. Another four party nominees ignored the boycott.

Thousands of residents rallied in Samara late last month after no opposition candidates were allowed to register for mayoral elections in the only big city nationwide not controlled by United Russia.

“The elections really resemble last year's October vote,” Shibanova said, referring to fraud-tainted elections that saw United Russia sweep votes in Moscow and many other locations amid a loud outcry from rivals.

A Just Russia spokesman Anton Orlov said the party expected “the most fierce” competition in the Novosibirsk region, where the regional legislature and some three dozens municipal bodies are to be elected.

“We expect a fight in all six regions” with legislative elections, Dmitry Shlyapin, a senior official with the Liberal Democratic Party, said by telephone.

United Russia said Monday that it plans to get majorities in every poll.

Communists in Nizhny Novgorod have managed to fend off attempts to ban them from elections for using heavy metal music from German band Rammstein in a 17-second campaign [video](#).

The Right Cause party, widely seen as a Kremlin pet project, asked a court to remove the Communists from the ballot for purported copyright infringement with their use of excerpts from the song “Mein Herz Brennt” (My Heart Burns).

But a Nizhny Novgorod court dismissed the lawsuit this week, ruling that the Volga television company that had produced the clip had selected the soundtrack, not the Communists, local Communist member Alexander Perov said Thursday.

“The Volga television company has an agreement with that band; it was their decision,” Perov told The Moscow Times.

The clip, which urged voters not to cast ballots for United Russia, showed a brown bear — United Russia's symbol — behind bars.

The Communist Party has also accused United Russia of trying to capitalize even on the ouster of Moscow's mayor, using it as a pretext to get additional media coverage. United Russia plans to release a list of its candidates for Moscow mayorship on Saturday — a time when no direct campaigning will be permitted.

“It's well-known that no agitation is allowed on Saturday. But by announcing the candidates for the position of Moscow mayor the ruling party will have all Internet media, television and radio stations reporting that United Russia has proposed Moscow mayorship candidates,” senior Communist Party member Ivan Melnikov said in a statement.

But Churov of the Central Elections Commission dismissed the allegations Thursday, saying United Russia is just doing its job, Interfax reported.

Moscow Times intern Alexandra Taranova contributed to the report.

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