

Primaries First Step to Political Modernization

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The United Russia primaries held across the country for the last few weeks have almost ended, but, despite what skeptics say, the primaries are not a pro forma procedure or a superficial public relations campaign by the ruling party. They have become a serious and more public element of Russian politics.

Skeptics are also mistaken when they say there will be little change among United Russia governors and deputies. Even last time, before primaries had been introduced, about one-fourth of all United Russia incumbent governors and deputies did not participate. Primaries have only intensified the process of screening candidates and have made political competition within the party more public.

Indeed, there were several surprises, such as when incumbent deputies found themselves near the bottom of party lists as the result of political bargaining between regional and federal elites. This happened in the Kurgan, Novosibirsk and Ulyanovsk regions, in Tatarstan and

elsewhere. For example, Duma Deputy Speaker Valery Yazev ranked 57th in the Sverdlovsk region and now plans to head the party list in Murmansk. Three deputies from the Buryatia and Volgograd regions pulled out of the primaries after the first round of voting.

Moreover, 20 relatively unpopular governors, and three not belonging to United Russia — Vladimir Governor Nikolai Vinogradov, Kirov Governor Nikita Belikh and Perm Governor Oleg Chirkunov — did not participate in the primaries at all. Another three from the Murmansk, Irkutsk and Magadan regions were eliminated during the elections. The governors of Kamchatka, Leningrad and Samara took second place in the primaries, and those in Karelia and Zabaikalsky placed third. As the primaries neared the end, officials announced that two-fifths of all governors would not head their party lists.

In Moscow, there appears at first to be many changes. Of the 15 or so deputies linked to former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, only two — United Russia members Andrei Isayev and Nikolai Gonchar — are likely to retain their seats. But the party list is still headed by Mayor Sergei Sobyenin and Lyudmila Shvetsova, deputy mayor for social programs.

There was also no shortage of scandals. Disputes arose in Perm, Oryol, Omsk, Primorye, Kostroma, Ulyanovsk and Irkutsk, demonstrating that, at least for the losers, these primaries were no idle game. Because the primaries lasted a full three weeks, candidates could react to the shifting realities as the process unfolded. At this point, it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding the effects of those scandals, except that a number of candidates who were prohibited from registering were later reinstated. Also, a special commission was created in Moscow to deal with the conflicts, and the results of its deliberations will probably be reflected in the final candidate lists.

These primaries have demonstrated that United Russia has an uphill battle ahead in many regions, and that the party leadership is preparing for that fight by stepping up internal party competition. Despite shifting to a purely proportional system of forming the Duma, the authorities are forced to give more voting power to regional political elites and party activists in the field. But most important, the primaries show that we are seeing some signs — albeit modest — that the country's political institutes are becoming more liberal and modern.

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