

Voter Apathy to Help Putin, Pollster Says

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Widespread apathy and a lack of alternatives may help Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and United Russia secure convincing wins in December parliamentary elections and a March presidential vote, the independent Levada Center pollster said.

The September announcement that Putin plans to trade roles with President Dmitry Medvedev and return to the Kremlin next year has dampened hopes of reform and reinforced many Russians' feelings of disenfranchisement, Levada found in surveys this month.

Some 24 percent of Russians believe that the job swap deal was done behind the people's backs, and 85 percent believe they have no say in political life, the surveys found.

That sense of resignation is likely to play into the hands of United Russia, which is seeking to retain its two-thirds majority in the State Duma in Dec. 4 elections, Levada head Lev Gudkov said in an interview.

"The authorities are betting on a low turnout," Gudkov said.

He said many critics of United Russia or Putin, convinced that the outcome is predetermined

and dismayed by the absence of a political force they find attractive, will not vote.

By contrast, United Russia can harness higher turnout among groups of voters that depend heavily on the state for their livelihood, such as soldiers, students and government workers.

"That implies that in the final result the proportion of United Russia supporters [voting] will be higher," Gudkov said.

He said he expects the total turnout will be boosted — in United Russia's favor — through falsifications such as ballot stuffing, particularly in tightly controlled regions such as the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan as well as in Moscow.

Levada has estimated that 12 percent of the ballots in Moscow were falsified in the last Duma elections, in 2007.

Its polls indicate that turnout in these Duma elections will be about 59 percent, down from 63.8 percent in 2007.

Gudkov said United Russia, backed by 59 percent of voters in a Levada poll this month, could still secure a two-thirds majority needed to change the Constitution.

Because of the way Duma seats are distributed, its chances will be greater if turnout among its critics is low and only three parties — instead of the four now in the Duma — win the 7 percent required to secure seats.

Official turnout was 69.7 percent in the 2008 presidential election, which Medvedev won easily.

Gudkov said Putin, with a 66 percent approval rating in Levada's most recent poll, is set to win the presidency in the first round of voting in March, avoiding a run-off by receiving more than 50 percent.

"The basis of his popularity is the hope that the economic growth of the pre-crisis years will resume and the lack of an alternative," Gudkov said, referring to the oil-fueled resurgence Russia experienced during his 2000-08 presidency.

He said that rising disappointment with the authorities in recent months could lead to isolated protests but was unlikely to bring large-scale upheaval soon.

"Local outbursts are possible, but they will not be supported throughout the country unless there is a significant fall in living standards," he said. "The negative trends can resonate by 2016 and 2017, ahead of the next election."

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