

Putin's Empty Promise of Honest Elections

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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At a meeting with a group of young lawyers last week, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin promised that the upcoming presidential election would be honest and that the results would not be manipulated. Prior to that, Vyacheslav Volodin, first deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, called on governors to guard against electoral violations in the presidential contest.

Should we put faith in Putin's promise? Will governors follow Volodin's instructions? Are fair and honest elections even possible in the current political system?

The March 4 election will be held under the old rules and is being organized by the same Central Elections Commission that has been accused of fostering electoral fraud in the December State Duma elections. Neither Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov nor any of his direct reports have been investigated, while the courts have thrown out most lawsuits from citizens and monitoring groups that presented evidence of fraud.

Thus, the Kremlin is essentially sending the elections commission a clear message: "You did an excellent job during the December elections. Keep up the good work."

Meanwhile, governors have been receiving mixed messages from the federal center. On the one hand, they have been publicly warned against committing or sanctioning election fraud. But at the same time, several governors in regions where United Russia performed badly in the December Duma elections have been dismissed.

What message did this send to current governors who want to keep their jobs by pleasing the Kremlin? Given this deeply ingrained system, fair elections are simply impossible, particularly considering the current relationship between the federal center and the governors.

When Putin uses the term "fair elections," how much meaning can this have in a vertical power structure that demands and rewards servile obedience to the Moscow leadership? The main goal of such a system is to satisfy the Kremlin, not the public. Governors and local party bosses are held accountable for the number of meetings they organize in support of the ruling party, the number of advertising campaigns they conduct and the final tally of votes United Russia wins in their regions.

The manner in which the pro-Putin rallies on Saturday were organized sheds light on how the upcoming election will be held. According to many media reports, thousands of state employees were instructed to participate in pro-Putin rallies. Some were promised money to attend, while others were threatened with layoffs and the loss of benefits if they didn't attend. Only a few days ago, United Russia warned its regional offices against committing administrative excesses when organizing pro-Putin rallies. But on the very same day, a Dozhd TV report showed how organizers of the pro-Putin rally in Moscow admitted to forcing people to participate — but dismissed those violations as "isolated incidents."

These types of abuses will only grow because the problem is systemic, not "isolated." There can be no free and fair elections until governors are elected directly by the people and political parties are allowed to register without any limitations or restrictions. In addition, the government must carry out true judicial reforms in which subservient judges are replaced with a court system that is truly independent of the political leadership. The question is whether these changes are possible while Putin is in power.

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