

Putin Support Strong Where Party Is Weak

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RZHEV, Tver Region — Sitting in a small office full of campaign materials, the head of United Russia’s district branch in Rzhev is confident as she gives her final orders to party activists just days before Sunday’s presidential election.

Lyubov Alexeyevna, an energetic retired policewoman, says that despite the fact that the unpopular party was largely left out of Vladimir Putin’s campaign, she is sure that the political group’s organizational clout will carry him through to victory without any violations.

In Rzhev, a city of about 70,000 inhabitants 230 kilometers west of Moscow, no campaign posters can be seen except for those endorsing Putin.

“Maybe the situation is different in Moscow, but people here have never had a rich life,” she said, adding that locals were grateful to Putin for increasing their pensions and social

benefits.

“Most of the surrounding villages will support Putin because people who live there survived through the hard times, and, even though they see negative things today, they don’t want to live through the situation of collapse,” she said.

But in December’s State Duma elections, Rzhev — which is one of the Tver region’s poorest cities — was sparing in its support for United Russia. The party gained just 27 percent of the vote and lost to its Communist rivals, who took nearly 36 percent of the vote.

Natalya Zuborevich, a regional expert from the Moscow-based Institute of Social Politics, sees no contradiction in the disparity in support.

“To kick off the brand of the ‘party of crooks and thieves’ is one thing, but Putin retains the image of a stable politician, and people do remember the turbulent 1990s,” she said.

She was echoed by Olga Dudkina, a senior researcher at the Rzhev Regional History Museum in her early 40s, who said she prefers “some kind of stability” and will vote for Putin as a result.

“Changes in Russia always turn into something very dangerous,” she said.

But in the Duma elections she — like many of her colleagues — voted for the Communists “out of protest” because the city suffers from poor infrastructure, bad roads and a weak economy due to the collapse of several local industrial companies. Still, in 2007 Rzhev was named one of Russia’s Cities of Military Glory for being the site of a brutal World War II battle with the Nazis in 1943.

The city was besieged by the Red Army for several months after becoming a Nazi stronghold. In the end, nearly 2 million Soviet soldiers died in the struggle and the German army lost more than 300,000 men.

“It’s not only the city that deserves being awarded the prize of being called a heroic city, but the people who lived here and continue to live [here],” Dudkina said bitterly.

But while Rzhev was able to come to terms with its past and even erected a cross to commemorate the deaths of German soldiers alongside the older Soviet monument, the current situation remains bleak.

Last September, hundreds of locals rallied against a move by the United Russia-dominated city parliament to abolish direct election of the mayor.

“It was the final dismantling of democratic institutions in our region,” Alexander Blynov, a local democracy activist wrote on his LiveJournal blog at the time.

Later, the local parliament chose a United Russia party member — businesswoman Natalya Vorobyova whose company services almost 100 percent of the city’s utilities sector — to take office.

Vorobyova keeps a low profile and is not popular among the locals. Several opposition

activists say they intend to fight for the return of direct elections.

The idea of returning to direct mayoral elections in Rzhev is even shared by some United Russia activists who, despite their backing of Putin, blame the party for making “systematic mistakes.”

“The party should become a system for citizens’ participation and not an instrument to vote for laws sent from above,” said Denis, a businessman and United Russia party member since 2007, who declined to give his last name.

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