

Novosibirsk Race Seen as Win for Opposition

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Newly elected mayor of Novosibirsk Anatoly Lokot speaking at a news conference after his victory on Monday.

Calling Novosibirsk a provincial backwater would be incorrect.

With 1.7 million residents, Novosibirsk is Russia's third-largest city with a nationally known opera theater and nearly 70 local universities and colleges. It also is known as "the town of academicians" for hosting the internationally known scientific center Akademgorodok.

City inhabitants themselves are characterized by archetypal Siberian warmheartedness and wit.

And last weekend they dealt a stinging loss to President Vladimir Putin.

Novosibirsk voters handily elected a Communist candidate, Anatoly Lokot, as their next mayor, becoming the latest big city to put an opposition-minded politician at the helm

and setting the stage for a battle for the regional governor's office.

Lokot, a veteran State Duma deputy and close ally of Communist Party chief Gennady Zyuganov, won in a field of 11 candidates with 43.7 percent of the vote, defeating ruling United Russia party candidate Vladimir Znatkov, who polled 39.6 percent, the local electoral commission said Monday. Voter turnout was fairly low at 31.3 percent.

Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, one of six opposition mayoral candidates who quit the race in order to back Lokot, declared the victory as a sign that voters wanted change and believed that it was attainable.

"The opposition's enemy in Novosibirsk was not so much the authorities but the apathy of residents who did not believe that change was possible," Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times.

"The regional governor ... succeeded in holding an early spring election on the assumption that people would not come to the polls," he said. "Our main goal was to disrupt this plan by inspiring a belief in victory with voters and to overcome discord among the opposition."

The scene that preceded Lokot's victory easily could have been mistaken for a drama of Shakespearean proportions. A conflict had brewed for months between Governor Vasily Yurchenko and presidential representative Viktor Tolokonsky, who represented different business elites and enjoyed various pockets of political support in the presidential administration.

On March 18, Yurchenko was fired by Putin for "loss of confidence," becoming only the second regional chief executive to lose his post for this reason after Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov in 2011.

Around the same time, Andrei Ksenzov, a former deputy governor backed by Tolokonsky, abruptly withdrew from the mayoral race without expressing public support for another candidate. He had been running in solid third place at 12 percent.

Meanwhile, Putin appointed Novosibirsk Mayor Vladimir Gorodetsky as acting governor. Gorodetsky, a Kremlin loyalist who had served as mayor since 2000, has not said whether he will run in the gubernatorial election on Sept. 14.

But a local United Russia official said the Kremlin had few options and might enlist Alexander Karelin, a three-time Olympic wrestling champion and veteran United Russia lawmaker who was born in Novosibirsk. "The bench is really short, and Alexander Karelin may well be the only hope for United Russia in the region," said the official, who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media. "No other ruling party politician enjoys sufficient popularity."

Karelin got a taste of local politics two weeks before the election when he was appointed to head the mayoral campaign of Znatkov, the United Russia candidate and acting mayor. The move significantly improved the standing of Znatkov, who had trailed Lokot by 10 percentage points when Karelin joined the campaign and ended up losing by less than 5 percentage points.

Znatkov's campaign was not without controversy. The city court barred him from the race on March 21 for not relinquishing his duties as mayor during the campaign period — an unprecedented measure toward a United Russia candidate — but the regional court subsequently reinstated him.

Why a Communist Won

The Communist victory can be explained by the city's prevalent political mood, analysts said. Novosibirsk is a place where the protest electorate — personified by students, professionals, intellectuals and disenfranchised citizens — is strong and mobilized. In the 2011 Duma elections, the Communist Party beat United Russia in each of the city's 10 electoral districts. Then, as now, the resistance toward the ruling party had as much to do with the Communists' success as their appeal.

"The campaign was difficult. There was no equal media access," said Alexei Rusakov, secretary of the Novosibirsk regional branch of the Communist Party. "But we persevered because the opposition managed to unite around a single candidate."

The Communists dispatched three observers to each of the city's 601 polling stations.

Rusakov said the victory shows that the Kremlin's grip on power must be altered and that new people must assume key posts. He said it also should encourage the opposition in other cities, including Moscow, that they could fairly win elections.

"The protest movement in Novosibirsk has never been different from that in Moscow," he said. "We also are well known for our protest rallies."

Series of Opposition Wins

The Novosibirsk election upset is the latest example in a series of successful or near-successful attempts by opposition candidates to win mayoral seats in large and mid-sized cities across Russia, a phenomenon demonstrating a trend that began in 2012 with Oleg Shein's near victory in the southern city of Astrakhan.

Shein received 30 percent of the popular vote in that race, which was won by a United Russia candidate and marked by alleged widespread fraud. He vehemently rejected the election results and went on a 40-day hunger strike, losing 14 kilograms.

A month after Shein lost in Astrakhan, on April 11, 2012, Yevgeny Urlashov trounced his United Russia rival in Yaroslavl to win the mayoral vote by 70 percent. But Urlashov, who like Lokot in Novosibirsk was a consolidated opposition candidate, did not last out his term. He was removed from office on July 18 last year and jailed on charges of soliciting a bribe of 14 million rubles (\$430,000).

Meanwhile, opposition candidate Yevgeny Roizman, head of the City Without Drugs organization, won the mayoral election in Yekaterinburg, the fourth-largest city in the country, with 30 percent of the vote on Sept. 8. His United Russia opponent received 27 percent.

The victories indicate that the opposition has become surprisingly competitive at the local

level across the country. Just as important, observers say, the protest movement has spread outside Moscow, where opposition blogger Alexei Navalny received a strong 27 percent against incumbent Mayor Sergei Sobyenin last September.

"The Novosibirsk result is a combination of a strong candidate, a lack of unity within the local establishment, and a divide of the loyalist electorate after Putin's dismissal of Yurchenko," said Mikhail Vinogradov, an analyst who tracks regional politics with the Peterburgskaya Politika think tank. "The cities have one thing in common — a demand for alternatives. There is otherwise very little in common among the winning candidates in these cities."

Last fall, Kremlin deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin expressed public approval of opposition candidates contesting mayoral races, a gesture that political analysts assumed to mean that the opposition would be allowed to participate in regional elections.

But this apparent approval has been followed by speculation that the Kremlin might ban mayoral elections altogether. Putin denied any planned ban at a December news conference, indicating that the reason was a lack of consensus on the issue within his inner circle.

What's Next?

Federal authorities and United Russia have repeatedly called on the opposition to "act instead of talking," which would include participating in elections. The opposition has begun to do just that, and a degree of political competition has returned to Russia, said Yevgeny Minchenko, founder of Minchenko Consulting, a government and public relations agency.

"An opposition win in a given city does not necessarily have a negative effect on the political system's stability," he said. "In fact, the opposite may be the case."

He said he would advise United Russia candidates to actively campaign and not to allow the ruling class to become too polarized. "My recommendation for opposition candidates is to use polarization to their advantage and to build coalitions," he said.

It is unclear whether opposition politicians can replicate their municipal successes on the regional level. Since gubernatorial elections were reintroduced in Russia in 2012, 13 campaigns have been held, with 12 won by United Russia members. Currently, 74 out of the 83 regional leaders are United Russia members. Eight of the other nine have no party affiliation, but the majority of them are United Russia supporters.

The more important question, however, is whether the elected leaders from the political opposition will be able to embody the changes that they demanded before they assumed power. They will need to demonstrate in deed that they are unlike the United Russia "crooks and thieves" whom they criticized on the campaign trail and can indeed implement goals within budgetary constraints.

Ivan Starikov, who is tipped to become Novosibirsk's next deputy mayor for economic affairs, was not overly concerned about such questions Monday. He said the weekend mayoral victory had re-energized the opposition and they were now looking forward to the gubernatorial election in the fall.

"The opposition — from the left wing to the liberal camp — unified around Lokot," Starikov said in a telephone interview. "It was immensely difficult to win in a single round of voting because of the unbelievable administrative resources of the ruling party. Now we have a chance to elect an opposition candidate as Novosibirsk's governor in September."

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