

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Electoral Politics in Russia: Are Citizens Speaking Up?

On February 25, 2010, two weeks before regional elections took place in the Russian Federation, Maria Eismont, Director of the Russian Independent Media Program at the New Eurasia Foundation in Moscow, came to the Harriman Institute for a screening and discussion of her new documentary, “Managed Democracy Misfires: How Krasnoturinsk Elected Its Own Mayor.” Krasnoturinsk is a small town in the Province of Sverdlovsk, located in the northeastern part of the Ural region—873 miles from Moscow, and 224 miles north of Yekaterinburg. The population is just barely 60,000, but the mayoral election that took place there last March attracted enough interest to warrant a documentary.

In order to understand why an election in this remote town triggered national attention, it is important to step back and examine the broader context of electoral politics in the Russian Federation. Russia is a managed democracy; competitive elections exist, but only in certain spheres, and with strict state regulation. There are four dominant parties: the United Russia Party, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and A Just Russia Party—but United Russia, which was established with the strong support of former President Vladimir Putin in 2001, continues to be the party of the state—in 2008, Prime Minister Putin became its chair. United Russia’s involvement with the state, as well as its political monopoly, has caused skepticism about the legitimacy of the electoral process in Russia.

In 2004, in the wake of the Beslan Hostage Crisis, Putin abolished the direct election of governors in Russia’s 89 (now 83) regions (his decision was reaffirmed by President Dimitry Medvedev this past November in response to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov’s suggestion for a constitutional amendment to reinstate gubernatorial elections). Putin changed the law in a way that allowed him to appoint governors directly. He justified the legislation by the need to concentrate state power in the face of terrorists. In fact, state power was concentrated already—even prior to Putin’s legislation, governors had little accountability to their citizens, and members of

the United Russia Party controlled most government posts.

Much like the gubernatorial elections used to do, mayoral elections tend to reinforce the power of the United Russia Party. Once in office, incumbents stay there for decades, and run the city with little regard for its electorate. Vladimir Terekhov, an employee of the Krasnoturinsk Electoral Commission, who was interviewed in Eismont’s documentary, compared small town politics in Russia to old American Westerns.

“There is a Mayor and a Sheriff and they do whatever they want.” Terekhov conveyed that building an opposition movement in local politics is nearly impossible because of the tremendous power wielded by mayors and their cronies.

In light of this, the election results in Krasnoturinsk last March were remarkable—Victor Mikhel, a United Russia member who had served as Krasnoturinsk’s mayor for over eighteen years, unexpectedly lost his seat to Sergei Verkhoturov, a previously unknown figure in town politics. According to Eismont, “Verkhoturov’s triumph proved that it’s far too soon to pronounce Russia’s electoral process a failed experiment.”

Verkhoturov had belonged to United Russia, but quit the party during his campaign, after Party officials told him not to run against Mikhel. In supporting Verkhoturov, citizens put their jobs on the line—if Mikhel had been re-elected in Krasnoturinsk, those who openly opposed him would never again find work in their town. “The people who support the ‘wrong’ candidate risk everything,” affirmed Natalia Kalinina, editor-in-chief of the town’s independent paper, *Vechernii Krasnoturinsk* (Evening Krasnoturinsk).

Verkhoturov’s campaign manager, Tatiana Sokolova, described the near impossibility of disseminating campaign literature—city employees followed Verkhoturov’s team, and each time they posted flyers, the city staff would take them down. “They would even take them out of people’s mailboxes.” When residents tried to stage a protest, the city sent a team of policemen. “I guess you could say that the protest was for democracy,” recalled Sokolova. About 200 people filled the

town square, “300 if you count the police,” added Olga Berdetskaya, the assistant editor of *Vechernii Krasnoturinsk*.

The police lined the perimeter and videotaped. The city administration sent a cleaning truck. “It was funny how they chose that very day, that very place, to clean the streets,” expressed Berdetskaya. The truck noise drowned out the megaphones. Finally, some protesters asked the driver to take a break from cleaning. “Luckily, he was a reasonable guy.” Sokolova said that the protesters, some of whom came from tiny villages, stunned her. “They were simple people expressing themselves very eloquently.” Citizens used the megaphones to plead with the administration. They wanted to be heard.

The town newspapers played an integral role during the campaign. “There are usually two or three papers in Russian towns—always the municipal paper, the content of which is dictated by the state, and, if towns can afford it, one or more private newspapers,” Eismont explained before the screening. An independent paper, *Vechernii Krasnoturinsk*, touted Verkhoturov throughout his campaign, and is largely responsible for paving his way to the mayoral seat. The municipal paper, *Zarya Urala* (The Dawn of the Urals), spread negative rumors about the candidate. “I knew that it was impossible to stay clean. You had to choose: either sling dirt or risk your job,” disclosed Ludmila Makeeva, a reporter from *Zarya Urala*. “I was told, ‘if you’re not with us, there’s the door.’” Despite the obstacles, the town’s citizens rallied to support Mikhail’s opponent, and surprisingly—they won.

“We have always loved our city. In its glory, it was an oasis of well-being,” Isabella Khokhrina, an older resident, said at the beginning of the film—she was referring to the 1990s, when the town’s industry was thriving. “When delegations came to visit us, or we encountered people from outside the town, we would sing them our anthem.” She repeated the words of the song for the camera. “We love our town of Krasnoturinsk, it’s beautiful in day or night, come visit and we’ll show you our town’s delights, and sing our favorite song.” Khokhrina confessed that times have changed. “A shadow of sadness hangs over our town. The results of the recent elections show that people can’t live like this.”

Eismont reasoned that the economic crisis, “which Mikhail had no more to do with than he influenced the ‘fat years,’” was a precipitating factor for the incumbent’s defeat. “When you have all the power—you make yourself responsible for everything, even the weather.” She imparted that Mikhail was not a particularly horrible mayor. “He

wasn’t good, but he wasn’t the worst of them. People just felt like they needed a change and Mikhail and his team were taking their persistent victory for granted—Mikhail didn’t even think to rig the vote because he was so certain that he would win,” Eismont reflected.

The Russian Federation is vast, and news concerning local politics often slips through the cracks. In order to stay current on regional political developments, the Independent Media Program collaborates with various newspapers across the Russian Federation—they learned about Verkhoturov’s sudden victory through *Vechernii Krasnoturinsk*. Sensing that something exciting was going on, Eismont jumped on the story. She quickly applied for a grant that would allow her to hire a professional team of filmmakers to document the town in the aftermath of the election, but discovered that it would take six months to process her application. “In six months everything would be forgotten, relations might be spoiled, and people probably wouldn’t be willing to talk,” Eismont explained. “I knew we had to go right away.”

Working with her colleague Charles Maynes, Eismont went to Krasnoturinsk. The two were later joined by another colleague, Andrey Babayev, who helped with the editing. “None of us were professional filmmakers,” she remarked. “We took the camera that I had at home—a semi-professional handheld—some funds from our budget, and went.” The crew purchased a tripod, “so that we felt like real filmmakers.”

Eismont and Maynes spent their nights at the houses of *Vechernii Krasnoturinsk* employees, and passed the days interviewing Krasnoturinsk citizens. “We wanted to get everyone, to tell the story entirely from the point of view of its principal actors. Our goal was to show as unbiased a portrayal as we could,” said Eismont, who, along with Maynes, had no presence in the footage.

Despite the filmmakers’ lack of expertise, the documentary does not seem unprofessional. It is well-paced, ironic, and skillfully shot. The voices of Krasnoturinsk immediately dominate the film—we hear the murmurs of various citizens discussing Verkhoturov’s sudden appearance as the camera zooms in on the sidewalks and buildings of a bustling small town in the mountains—“Who is Verkhoturov?” “He came out of nowhere,” “Appeared suddenly,” “Within three weeks his name was everywhere!” The murmurs continue as the screen darkens and the word “Verkhoturov” flashes all over it in white.

The scenes shift to the upbeat sounds of a folk orchestra. Most strikingly the music accompanies the unveiling ceremony of the municipal

bathroom, where Mikhel presents a freshly painted building. The screen flashes a sign: “The Temple of Cleanliness.” Mikhel describes the new construction as, “one of the town’s most pivotal structures.” The next clip reveals the bathroom interior—a pile of ruins.

Sadly, the bathroom remains unfinished even now, despite Verkhoturov’s campaign promises. “This is Russian politics, and just like palm trees don’t grow in the North, Russia doesn’t breed democrats,” remarked Eismont. Verkhoturov had also promised to establish a public chamber—a forum for citizens to discuss internal politics—he did not do this either. He *has* re-joined the United Russia Party. “But, Verkhoturov’s failures are beside the point,” Eismont stressed. “The point is that the electoral process in Russia can be functional—that people have some agency in choosing who governs them.” She explained that she had never expected Verkhoturov to follow through on his guarantees. “Even if you have the best intentions when you come into office, in Russia’s small towns there is never enough funding to fulfill them.” As for re-joining the ruling party—surviving as a political official in the Russian Federation without joining United Russia, is impossible. “If a United Russia member loses an election, they buy off the winner.” The former candidate always vanishes from the scene.

Consequently, the documentarians were unable to interview Mikhel. “He was completely unapproachable, after the election he simply disappeared.” The former mayor is shown in the documentary only through clips from his public speeches. Eismont hopes that this year, when she returns her team to Krasnoturinsk for the anniversary of Verkhoturov’s election, and a public screening of their documentary, she will be able to approach Mikhel. “Perhaps he will be willing to talk now that the hype has died down.”

Eismont speculates that if Krasnoturinsk had been located much closer to Moscow, the electoral outcome would have been different. “We filmed another documentary in Zhukovsky, where the local government wanted to cut down a forest in order to pave a VIP road to a car show.” This was during election time, and an opposition candidate, who promised to preserve the forest, won the

majority vote. “Because the town was in proximity to Moscow, the central government intervened,” Eismont described. The government declared seven of the polling stations faulty and discounted their results—the incumbent remained in office. “The crazy thing is that everyone knew about this; newspapers reported on it, it was a topic of great discussion.” She said that the matter is currently being challenged in court. “No one knows how this story will end.”

Despite her country’s shortcomings, Eismont emphasized that the situation is not as bad as it is often portrayed by outsiders. “There is a general tendency to stereotype and oversimplify Russia,” she admitted. “It is not a very healthy democracy, but it’s not North Korea.” Shortly after Eismont’s talk at the Harriman Institute, the Russian Federation held another round of regional elections. The results undermined (ever so slightly) United Russia’s dominance. The party maintains a stronghold over the country even after the elections, but, though it held on to plurality in all eight regions that elected legislatures, United Russia’s ballot share fell in seven of them,—dropping below 50% in four—and the party lost a mayoral seat in Irkutsk, a Siberian city with a population just above half a million.

As Eismont suggested, it appears that United Russia’s power is eroding only in those regions farthest from Moscow, with its most visible decline in the Province of Sverdlovsk—the very Sverdlovsk that is home to Krasnoturinsk. Analysts deliberate that United Russia’s faltering victory could be a reaction to the criticism following Russia’s last regional elections—in October 2009 the United Russia Party won by a landslide, and after accusations of electoral fraud, President Medvedev encouraged closer election monitoring and a more visible opposition. It is possible that United Russia’s slight electoral slip has been manufactured, or perhaps, people are finally fed up. Most likely, it is a combination of both.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner

