

Liberal anti-Putin coalition causes upset in Moscow council elections

United Democrats triumph in central seats in Russian capital, including the one where the president cast his vote.

A coalition of liberal opposition parties has won a series of victories in local council elections in central Moscow, beating candidates from Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party.

The United Democrats movement took 11 out of 12 council seats in the Tverskaya district, a wealthy neighbourhood adjacent to the Kremlin. It also secured all 12 seats in the Gagarinsky district, where Putin cast his vote on Sunday. The opposition likewise upset the odds to triumph in a dozen other districts, the vast majority of them in the heart of the Russian capital.

"We took the centre!" Maxim Katz, the opposition's campaign manager, wrote on Twitter.

The opposition coalition's breakthrough campaign was masterminded by the former MP Dmitry Gudkov and the Yabloko and Parnas opposition parties.

Among the coalition's advisers was Vitali Shkliarov, a 41-year-old Soviet-born political consultant who worked on Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign last year. Shkliarov, who headed the US senator's mobilisation efforts in Nevada, helped the opposition coalition register almost 1,000 candidates for Sunday's district council elections.

"This is a new era for Russian politics," said Shkliarov on Monday. "Everyone is so shocked. It's so symbolic that the opposition now controls the district where Putin is registered to vote."

The vote represents a rare electoral success for Russia's liberal opposition, whose candidates are often barred from standing for public office. This time round, however, the Kremlin decided to relax its grip on election registration procedures, in an attempt to hold what Moscow city officials hailed as "the most honest elections ever".

Yekaterina Schulmann, a prominent political analyst, said the liberal opposition had achieved a symbolic and political victory by infiltrating the Kremlin's electoral machine.

Among the victorious candidates was Ilya Yashin, a former ally of Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader who was gunned down in Moscow in 2015. "There is a new sheriff in town," Yashin said after taking first place in the vote in central Moscow's Krasnoselsky district.

Although local councillors have little political power, their support is vital for anyone who wants to stand in mayoral elections in Moscow.

The election of almost 200 United Democrats councillors will make it much easier for the opposition to challenge Sergei Sobyenin, the Kremlin-backed mayor of Moscow, at next year's elections.

Sobyenin has angered many Muscovites by ordering seemingly endless roadworks and renovations across the city, which critics say are aimed purely at enriching government officials and Kremlin-linked property developers.

Although the electoral victories in central Moscow were greeted with euphoria by opposition supporters, United Russia still managed to secure about 75% of district council seats across the city.

Allegations of vote fraud in favour of Putin's party were widespread, however. Golos, an independent election monitoring group, registered about 600 complaints. Video footage was also posted online of a district official in western Moscow apparently instructing polling station staff on how to falsify the vote count.

Turnout at Sunday's elections was low, at about 15% - half the turnout at last year's parliamentary polls. In other votes across Russia on Sunday, United Russia won every seat in 16 polls for regional governors. Opposition-friendly candidates, including Yevgeny Roizman, the popular mayor of Yekaterinburg, Russia's fourth-biggest city, were kept off the ballot in most regions by election officials loyal to the Kremlin.

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