The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Voting Rights Group Says 'Falsifications' in Moscow Elections Inevitable

By Paul Goble

September 28, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

VIENNA &mdash The Moscow city government, which pioneered many of the "dirty" political techniques that Vladimir Putin extended to Russia as a whole to ensure the electoral outcomes that the regime wants, has so perfected the system that "falsifications [at the ballot box] aren't needed, but they happen anyway," according to an election watchdog group.

On the one hand, Andrei Buzin, president of the Inter-Regional Union of Voters, says in an article posted Sunday that the Russian government gets its way without the falsifications that normally set off alarm bells among observers who consider only the day of voting.

After Yury Luzhkov was elected Moscow mayor in 1992, he began the construction of "a government model, many elements of which were later borrowed [by Putin during his presidency] and extended throughout the country" in the quest of both for "predictable results" from any election.

Because the Russian Constitution mandates elections and because Russian laws governing them support the holding of such votes, Buzin suggests that most of these activities fall under the rubric of what Russians call "dirty political techniques."

The Moscow "model," Buzin suggests, should be called "an oligarchy," in which there is an intermixing of power and property resembling that found in Latin America in the 1950s combined with demonstrative government paternalism and the active use of "secret police," two inheritances from the Soviet past.

The four basic features of the government system are "an extremely harsh vertical of executive power," "a monopolization of the mass media," a departure from "the principle of the division of power" and "concentration of property in the hands of government bureaucrats."

Because of the Constitutional requirement for elections and the presence in the Russian capital of "a more or less politicized population," Buzin says, "it was impossible to immediately go to completely administered elections." Instead, "the degradation started gradually," although he suggests that the signs of where things were headed could be seen already in 1996.

In that year, he notes, the prefects and subprefects for the first time "formed in practice completely controlled election commissions," an arrangement that allowed the city government to "ignore" the opinions of even "the politically active part of society" and ensure that the leadership's candidates would get in regardless of what the people thought.

Even before then, the powers that be in Moscow began using "administrative resources" alongside "contemporary electoral techniques," regularly putting political operatives on the payroll during election campaigns. But that was not sufficient, especially given the adoption in 1997 of what Buzin said was the "most progressive" election law since 1917.

Given that law, Moscow officials had to adapt their approach, using their control over election commissions, which until 2002 had the right to drop the registration of candidates without a court decision, and over large portions of the media in order to ensure that the right candidates got coverage and the wrong ones did not.

These techniques became more effective and the degradation of the electoral process became more advanced, Buzin says, because of "the unprecedentedly low norm of representation of the Moscow City Duma, where one deputy represented approximately 200,000 voters," a ratio that ultimately converted voters' control "into a fiction."

Also important to this "degradation" of democracy, the voting rights activist says, was the compilation of "an informal 'mayor's list'" of candidates. Those who were on it were given better coverage and support; those who weren't got neither and therefore typically lost. Over time, as Buzin shows, this was so successful that it became almost superfluous.

Indeed, by 2001, the elections were "almost without any choice, in the sense that the forces of the competitors were incomparable: all the administrative resources, including budgetary ones, worked for [the candidates] on the list." And those not on the list suffered. As a result,

33 of the 35 on the "list" won.

Buzin carefully traces the many ways the powers that be in Moscow exploited the situations created by party list voting, by single-member districts where "pseudo-choice" existed but where the overall outcome was determined and by requirements that a certain percentage of the voters participate for an election to be valid.

In Moscow, he writes, "direct falsification in the elections of the mayor and Moscow City Duma earlier did not have a massive character &mdash there was simply no need for that since everything was decided in advance." But sometimes falsification nonetheless happened either because of "insufficiently experienced" officials or counterproductive outcomes.

The latter have occurred when officials have used the resources at their command either to exclude opposition candidates or make it clear that they have no chance of winning. This has led to a situation in which Russians not surprisingly decide not to take part in a charade where everything has been decided in advance.

But when certain participation rates are required for an election to be valid, officials will falsify results to ensure that the necessary share of voters is listed as having taken part. When the officials do that, "falsifications in favor of one of the parties and the administration candidates" occurs, but this is not so much the intention as a collateral, if "dirty," benefit.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2009/09/28/voting-rights-group-says-falsifications-in-moscow-elections-inevitable-a35037