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United Russia Claims Food Price Reduction

By Derek Andersen

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A specialized group created by the United Russia political party claimed Thursday that it had succeeded in reducing basic food prices.

People's Oversight "has proved itself as an effective way to fight rising prices for socially significant goods," Viktor Zvagelsky, a State Duma member from the United Russia party and chairman of the People's Oversight federal commission, said in a written statement issued by the party.

Since the group's creation in September, Zvagelsky maintains that prices have fallen throughout the country for chicken, flour, bread, sugar, rice, pasta, potatoes, cabbage, onions and carrots. The price of chicken has fallen in the Central Federal District between 3 percent and 10 percent, and the price of rye bread — between 8 and 20 percent.

People's Oversight takes credit for the alleged price decrease. "It is obvious that the work of the people's overseers is a constraint on the owners of enterprises that sell foodstuffs," the

group said.

Their work involves planned "raids" on supermarkets throughout the country, where they record prices. If gouging is discovered, they inform government agencies. People's Oversight said it works with the anti-monopoly service and prosecutor's offices.

In July of this year, the government set rules for the imposition of price controls on socially significant food products, including the ones Zvagelsky listed.

The Federal Statistics Service does not back up Zvagelsky's claim that prices have fallen. According to the service, food prices went up 0.8 percent in October, and 10 percent so far for 2010. Deputy Minister of Economic Development Andrei Klepach said in October that food prices are rising and will continue to rise through next year.

Tatyana Polyakova, an aide to Zvagelsky, said the group has spread to all parts of the country now.

Maria Kurnosova, head of public relations for Auchan, told The Moscow Times that People's Oversight had conducted a raid two weeks ago at the company's outlet in Yekaterinburg.

"They called the manager in advance and set a time," Kurnosova said. Following the visit, Auchan never heard from the group again, though Kurnosova said other raids might have gone unnoticed.

At the Viktoria company group, which owns the Viktoria, Kvartal, Semeinaya Kopilka and Kesh supermarket chains, neither public relations manager Ksenia Sergeyeva nor marketing manager Yevgeny Nazarov had heard of People's Oversight.

Polyakova said the raids are not dramatic. "They go in and copy down prices," she said.

Polyakova said the group compares the raiders' findings from various stores and publishes the results on its web site and in local newspapers.

United Russia Supreme Council Chairman and State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov said in September that 4,000 People's Oversight groups had been established in 80 regions and about 12,500 stores had been inspected.

People's Oversight gets volunteer participants from seven other groups, Polyakova said. The main supporters are the pro-Kremlin Young Guard and Pensioners of Russia, Polyakova said. She also listed the small-business lobby group Opora and the Russian Consumers Union among supporters.

Polyakova said the group intends to continue its actions. "The influence on prices can be seen," she said.

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