The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Travesty in Tambov

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March 28, 2011



The Tambov region provides an excellent illustration of the connection between United Russia's political monopoly, rampant corruption and the low standard of living in Russia.

On July 13, President Dmitry Medvedev appointed Tambov Governor Oleg Betin to a fourth term. Betin has been governor several times since 1995. He is a member of United Russia, although in the 1990s he was a member of the Communist Party. Medvedev particularly values Betin for his role in the 2008 presidential election, when the president received more than 72 percent of the Tambov vote.

The results of the recent March 13 elections demonstrate that the Tambov region has not lost its touch in "organizing" elections, with United Russia reporting 65 percent of the vote there — one of its highest results in the March vote.

But many Tambov region residents and analysts have serious doubts about the veracity of that figure. The region may very well have been the leader in a completely different category — in its degree of election fraud and blatant use of federal and local administrative resources. According to facts presented at a March 18 news conference in Tambov by local members of

the Communist Party, Yabloko and other opposition parties, 20 percent of the votes were cast in people's homes, not in polling stations, Yabloko was barred from the election, voters were bused to polling stations, ballot boxes were stuffed, and people submitted absentee ballots at multiple polling stations. This evidence has been submitted to the Prosecutor General's Office to initiate an investigation into charges of election fraud.

Elections have essentially become a carefully orchestrated charade of rigged results in favor of United Russia. The cast in the farce includes candidates, election committee members and administration officials. What's more, law enforcement agencies turn a blind eye to these criminal activities, refusing to respond when perpetrators are caught in the act. Opposition forces and human rights activists are currently gathering evidence to cancel the election results and prosecute the offenders.

According to independent observers and surveys, only 25 percent to 35 percent of Tambov residents actually support United Russia, a figure comparable with the low results the party received in relatively free elections in the Kirov region, which, like Tambov, is one of the most economically depressed regions in the country. Residents of Tambov and Kirov attribute this stagnation and degradation to the incompetence, inefficiency and corruption of the party of power. In Kirov, where fraudulent schemes were apparently less effective than in Tambov, United Russia received 36 percent of the vote. Clearly, United Russia's dazzling result of 65 percent in Tambov was possible only because of large-scale fraud.

United Russia risks committing criminal acts and reporting absurdly high results because it is desperate to retain power. The Kremlin judges the effectiveness of its regional governors primarily by how successfully they obtain votes for the ruling party. For the leaders of United Russia, the ends clearly justify the means, so they close their eyes to these violations of the law. The success of United Russia and governors is tightly intertwined because only the party earning the most votes can propose gubernatorial candidates to the president.

Tambov Governor Betin has an able assistant for promoting United Russia in his son, Vyacheslav Betin. Only 31 years old, Vyacheslav holds the posts of deputy Tambov mayor, city legislature deputy and deputy secretary of the city's United Russia organizing committee. He is also in charge of the municipal housing sector and is the head of Tambov Investment, the region's major construction company.

In addition, the governor's son owns one of the two largest property management companies in the city — a real estate empire consisting of more than 700 apartment buildings. Numerous complaints have been sent to Medvedev, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Investigative Committee and the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service reporting that the minutes of meetings supposedly held among residents of those buildings and granting management rights to Vyacheslav Betin's company were actually falsified.

Residents have also recorded multiple incidents of the company pocketing money for uncompleted work, illegally raising utility and rent rates, and charging excessive fees for the mandatory installation of electricity meters. All of the responsible government agencies have turned a deaf ear to their appeals. Every attempt by residents to work with competing property management companies has also been blocked. Property management companies in cities such as Tambov are like gold mines for their owners, enabling them to pocket hundreds

of millions of rubles every year for maintenance that is never performed and services that are never rendered.

It is United Russia that makes it possible for the Betin boys to get rich by building elite apartments in choice locations and collecting money from thousands of apartment residents while the city's housing infrastructure falls into serious neglect and disrepair. Day after day, on the black soil of the ancient Tambov region, the people grow increasingly impoverished as the kleptocracy's endless election fraud, thievery and corruption enable their "elected representatives" to reap millions.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/28/travesty-in-tambov-a5925