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Donating Blood to Help United Russia Stay Alive

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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There is something sinister in the way ballot boxes were purportedly stuffed during the March 13 Tambov regional elections to boost United Russia's results. It was pulled off under the cover of a blood drive.

Last Thursday, Nikolai Vorobyov, a lawyer and Tambov regional head of the Party of People's Freedom, released a 20-page report detailing election fraud. It contained hundreds of testimonies, photos, videos and statements made by witnesses. As a drop of water reflects the composition of the larger sea, a glimpse into the Tambov elections reflects the entire complex machinery of lies and fraud that United Russia apparently uses over and over again across the country to create the illusion of popular support for the party.

According to Vorobyov's report, this is how the election fraud was carried out:

Tambov State Technical University was the epicenter of the scheme. Starting at 8 a.m.,

officials distributed packs of ballots that were already signed and notarized by local election committee members and marked with votes for United Russia candidates.

Young people were handed special blue folders containing stacks of 15 or 20 stuffed ballots. The hired or recruited ballot stuffers and election comittee members who played a direct role in the fraud identified one another with the help of a small calendar that they carried in their passports. This served as the "secret password." Tellingly, the calendars advertised a blood drive with the words: "Blood donor service. State program for increasing blood donations. More donors means more life."

Here is how the "donors" operated. A minivan would transport a group of four or five students all day, bringing them to one polling place after another. After pulling up, the young people would leave the car, present their calendars to a committee member who held the same calendar and then receive a bunch of absentee ballots for people who had either died, moved away but remained on the lists or were otherwise unable to vote. They would then enter the voting booth and pretend to fill out the absentee ballot, but step out and drop the pack of pre-prepared ballots in the box. Then they would return to their bosses from the election committee for another blue folder.

The conveyor belt of "donors" worked all day like a well-oiled machine, right up until the polling places closed that evening. The operation involved about 1,300 young people and their coordinators, dozens of cars and hundreds of election committee members — mainly teachers, doctors, social workers and municipal employees. Also involved were members of the Federal Security Service, Interior Ministry and Prosecutor General's Office, who were instructed to remove obstinate election observers and ignore the hundreds of complaints that citizens and observers lodged regarding election violations.

The falsifiers prepared the required number of ballots in advance. Tambov university students were forced to obtain absentee ballots beforehand and give them to university administrators. A mind-boggling 26,000 absentee ballots were printed in the Tambov region, according to the report. The students were threatened with expulsion or failing grades if they didn't comply.

Ballot boxes were placed in a way that election observers could not see them. Election committee members signed for citizens, concealing that they had stuffed ballot boxes or otherwise distorted the figures. Damaged ballots or those cast for other parties were added to the total count for United Russia. The final results were almost always "corrected," and massive changes were made to the voter lists, sometimes with the complicity of the entire election committee. Twenty percent of the vote — a very high number for any election — was cast by people who supposedly could only vote at home, such as the elderly and disabled.

Moreover, election observers and journalists were regularly expelled from polling places. Most of the appointed election committee heads and their secretaries were United Russia members. Candidates from Yabloko, a leading opposition party in the region, were not allowed to participate in the election at all.

As a result, the party of power announced results that are, literally, unbelievable given the fact that it received less than 40 percent of the vote in similar regions, like Kirov. United Russia claims that it received 65 percent of the vote in Tambov, although its pre-election ratings were 35 percent. Of the 303,000 total votes United Russia claims to have received, an

estimated 100,000 to 120,000 were falsified in one form or another, according to the report.

Dozens of Tambov residents are ready to testify as witnesses and to produce evidence that would serve as the basis for a huge criminal case and for the nullification of the election results. But they have been unable to move their case forward because the courts and law enforcement agencies are loyal to United Russia and the vertical power structure, which will protect their vested interests at all costs.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Tambov affair is that thousands of ordinary and otherwise respectable citizens — teachers, doctors, librarians and administrators — were more than willing to participate. These are people who are responsible for the physical and moral well-being of others. Their relatives, neighbors and colleagues also knew of their participation.

What's more, thousands of young people driven by cynical United Russia slogans of "patriotism, stability and spirituality" stuffed ballots to keep the party of crooks and thieves in power. Hundreds of newly reformed "policemen" — who were supposed to be an improvement over their predecessors, the militsia — were all too willing to close their eyes. That is how an entire society becomes morally corrupt to the core.

Now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his associates are planning another "blood donor drive" for Dec. 4 — the State Duma elections. But much more "blood" will need to be collected than in Tambov. Judging by statements from United Russia leaders, the party has been instructed to collect 65 percent of the vote any way it can, although the party's ratings are at 40 percent and falling.

Be prepared. The Kremlin's blood collectors are coming to your town soon.

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