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Putin Will Need a Long Shower After the Vote

By Nikolai Petrov

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Although we are only at the early stages of December's State Duma elections, there are already three signals that give us a clear idea of how the vote will turn out.

The first signal is that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is throwing himself directly into this election campaign as he has never done before. For the past year, he has regularly conducted United Russia congresses in the federal districts and it made deals with the regional political elite under this formula: loyalty in exchange for lucrative projects. Putin has been actively building up his All-Russia People's Front and turning himself into the leader of a corporate state.

The second signal is that Putin has retained the most odious election officials in his power vertical, those associated with numerous scandals and violations. Most prominent among them are Vladimir Churov, head of the Central Elections Commission since 2007, and Valentin Gorbunov, who has headed the Moscow city election committee since 1994. Gorbunov was

responsible for the scandalous results of the 2009 elections that prompted representatives of every minority Duma party to protest electoral falsifications.

It is thus no surprise that in response to the question of what he would do the morning after the presidential elections, Putin recently said he would wash the dirt off of himself — both in the hygienic and political meanings of the word. Indeed, there will be plenty of dirt in the upcoming Duma and presidential elections.

The third signal is that President Dmitry Medvedev recently met with representatives of regional election commissions, but the only public statements to come from those talks referred to continuing improvements to the electoral system.

At least one reason for the meeting was to deliver a report concerning numerous violations committed during legislative elections in March for the Tambov region that gave United Russia a clearly padded 65 percent of the vote. That report was prepared by the former head of the Tambov election committee. The lack of a public response by the president suggests that he endorses such a conclusion.

Thus, there is no doubt that the authorities are preparing for a massive falsification of the Duma elections in December. Or more accurately, they are preparing results in advance that would give at least 60 percent of the vote to Putin's front — the only way it can possibly achieve a significant victory.

A final confirmation that such a scenario is in the works will come when international election observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are denied entry to Russia on some trumped-up technicality or by false Kremlin claims that the observers have a Western bias.

But there are at least two positive aspects to this rather dour picture. First, the wide dissemination on the Internet of the Tambov report suggests that millions of Internet users will also learn of a repeat of these electoral violations in the December vote. Second, far more members of the political elite are likely to oppose falsified election results this year. Thus, we can expect a spate of public scandals resulting from voter fraud and increased pressure on the government to rectify the situation.

Nikolai Petrov is a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Correction: An earlier version of this article misidentified the head of the Moscow city election committee. The correct name is Valentin Gorbunov.

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