The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

St. Pete Police Confiscate Newspapers Criticizing Matviyenko

By Alexandra Odynova

August 16, 2011



Days ahead of municipal by-elections that are to launch St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko into the Federation Council, local authorities are pulling out all the stops to ensure that nothing disrupts the vote.

The latest incident saw city police seize most of the circulation of A Just Russia's party newspaper late Monday, citing possible extremist content, the party said Tuesday on its web site.

Matviyenko is running in district elections in the Petrovskoye and Krasnenkaya Rechka districts, both set for Sunday. She needs a legislator's mandate to be eligible for the Federation Council, where the Kremlin and the ruling United Russia party intend to make her speaker instead of Just Russia founder Sergei Mironov, who was ousted in May.

The seized newspaper, A Just Russia St. Petersburg, urges residents to vote against

Matviyenko, who is running without any rivals from the opposition.

Police have not explained why the newspaper was targeted, but said a check into its content for extremist information would take up to 10 days, all but ensuring that the paper will not be available in time for the vote.

Unidentified police officers said in "an informal chat" that the seizure was sanctioned "from above," the party said.

In total, some 145,000 copies of the paper were seized, State Duma Deputy Oksana Dmitriyeva, who heads A Just Russia's St. Petersburg branch, told Interfax on Tuesday.

She said police were also confiscating additional copies of the newspaper, distributed by party activists near St. Petersburg metro stations. She did not specify where the copies came from.

St. Petersburg officials "are simply afraid of open and democratic elections," Mironov said Tuesday.

Matviyenko did not comment on the story. Last month, the Kommersant Vlast weekly accused her subordinates of seizing most copies of a critical issue.

Meanwhile, Krasnenkaya Rechka election officials have asked for Dmitriyeva to be stripped of parliamentary immunity for urging locals to vote against Matviyenko.

Dmitriyeva has no right to participate in the campaign during her work time because it constitutes abuse of office, the election commission said, RIA-Novosti reported. These accusations were echoed by Petrovskoye officials Tuesday.

Dmitriyeva dismissed the allegation Tuesday, saying she is not abusing her office because she is currently on vacation, and promised to continue her campaign against Matviyenko, Interfax reported.

Liberal opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was briefly detained Sunday and Monday for campaigning against all candidates in the Petrovskoye and Krasnenkaya Rechka elections. He was pelted with eggs after the second arrest, with the perpetrators escaping undeterred by police.

A reporter with St. Petersburg-based news site Fontanka.ru, Alexandra Garmazhapova, resigned last week after her report on the elections was deleted from the site over unspecified violations of election laws. Garmazhapova had described a meeting between Krasnenkaya Rechka administration and entrepreneurs who discussed ways to help Matviyenko win the vote.

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