The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bread and Circuses Beckon Matviyenko Voters in St. Petersburg

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August 21, 2011



Two St. Petersburg districts rolled out bread and circuses to lure voters to polling stations Sunday, all but ensuring that Governor Valentina Matviyenko will get a legislator's mandate.

Any other time, municipal by-elections would go unnoticed, but votes in the tiny districts of Petrovskoye and Krasnenkaya Rechka were too crucial a step for Matviyenko, who needed to become a legislator to be eligible for the speaker's seat in the Federation Council.

Preliminary turnout results indicated late Sunday that Matviyenko would sweep the vote in both constituencies, as local authorities went out of their way to ensure that the voters did not go to their dachas. Early estimates by election officials showed that turnout was upward of 18 percent in Petrovskoye and more than 30 percent in Krasnenkaya Rechka — astonishingly high levels for a by-election.

Preliminary voting results were expected Monday.

The elections followed a campaign filled with scandal and tarnished by the abundant use of "administrative resources," which were required to help the Kremlin replace the unpopular governor ahead of State Duma elections while filling a Federation Council speaker's seat with a loyal politician.

Clowns offered free ice cream on Sunday, and acrobats performed tricks outside the polling stations, while inside, stalls were stocked to the ceiling with cheap buns, Interfax reported.

Health-conscious voters could get medical examinations right on the premises, including from the chief pediatrician of the city government's health care committee, Lev Erman, the report said.

Pets were not forgotten either, with owners given the chance for free checkups for dogs and cats at some polling stations.

Also on offer were free tickets to the circus, an oldies pop concert and a football workshop with Yury Zheludkov, a Zenit St. Petersburg star of the 1980s, St. Petersburg news site Fontanka.ru reported. Krasnenkaya Rechka voters could opt for a bus tour of Pavlovsk, a town developed around the former palace of the imperial family.

The campaign kicked off in June, when President Dmitry Medvedev proposed to make Matviyenko, 62 and St. Petersburg's governor since 2003, the new speaker of the Federation Council.

The previous speaker, Just Russia head Sergei Mironov, was ousted in May by the ruling United Russia. Both parties are loyal to the Kremlin, but A Just Russia has stolen United Russia votes.

The federal government was also interested in replacing Matviyenko, who never quite gelled with Petersburgers, before the Duma elections, analysts said.

An elected legislator of any level can be made senator, but Matiyenko's road to the seat turned out more thorny than the Kremlin probably expected, not the least because of A Just Russia, which promised to battle her on the ballot.

To avoid the potential embarrassment of losing, Matviyenko kept silent on which constituency she would run in. The news became public only after registration for the vote was closed.

The opposition cried foul, saying district officials had refused to disclose information on upcoming elections, despite being obliged to do so by law, but their lawsuits were thrown out.

In the end, Matviyenko faced no competition to speak of. All rivals were complete unknowns nationwide, and some, possibly, even in St. Petersburg. Among her competitors were three United Russia members, a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, a Peterburgteploenergo official and two ex-members of A Just Russia whom the party denounced as renegades.

The list also included a sales representative of Coca-Cola HBC Eurasia, Ivan Bogdanov, and the temporarily unemployed Fuad Mashallah Oglu Hasanov.

Some 8,000 voters are registered in Petrovskoye, and another 13,000 in Krasnenkaya Rechka. Three mandates were up for grabs in each district.

The opposition tried to convince locals to vote against all candidates by destroying their ballots, but authorities did their best to prevent this, briefly arresting liberal politician Boris Nemtsov and former Kamchatka Governor Mikhail Mashkovtsev over the calls and seizing 145,000 copies of A Just Russia's newspaper that contained anti-vote materials.

The elections have no minimum turnout requirement, but local authorities wanted a high enough turnout to secure the legitimacy of Matviyenko's legislature bid, Fontanka.ru reported earlier this month. The report was later deleted, allegedly over ethical concerns, and its author resigned from the news site.

The report also provided a detailed list of entertainment events planned by local officials and entrepreneurs to keep voters in the city on Sunday — just as actually happened. No information was available on how much it cost to stage the events.

Reports on violations were, meanwhile, easy to come by. Gazeta.ru reported, for example, that in violation of the law its reporter was denied access to the vote records at a polling station in Petrovskoye.

Observers with the unregistered Party of People's Freedom spotted one voter cast three ballots wrapped in one, while at another station opposition monitors were barred when trying to count the turnout, said Ilya Yashin, an activist with the Solidarity movement.

He called the elections "a special operation" implemented with "unprecedented administrative resources."

"I haven't witnessed anything like this even during presidential elections," Yashin told The Moscow Times from St. Petersburg after visiting several polling stations.

"A few voters complained that the authorities only do something good for the voters when they want something in return," Yashin said.

The local elections committee said there were no "significant" violations, Interfax reported.

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