

United Russia Official Buys Votes

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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The ruling United Russia party scrambled to distance itself Monday from a senior member in the republic of Udmurtia, who was filmed promising money for votes to local organizations at a closed meeting.

The party has been accused of buying votes for years, but this is one of the few instances when it has been caught red-handed, said a leading regional analyst.

In the [video](#), dated Oct. 24 and available on YouTube, Denis Agashin, city manager for the republic's capital, Izhevsk, explicitly tells veterans' organizations that their funding will depend on how their municipal districts vote in the State Duma elections next month.

The sums would range from 500,000 rubles (\$16,000) a year for organizations in districts where United Russia gets 51 to 54 percent of the vote to twice that amount for a 60 percent vote.

"We'll keep this approach in the future for all financing," Agashin said in the video. "If 41

percent vote for United Russia in the Oktyabrsky district, why should they get as much as the Leninsky district with its 60 percent vote? I think that's unfair."

The Oktyabrsky district got 41 million rubles based on the last vote, compared with 75 million for the Leninsky district, Agashin said. He added that the vote-based financing was introduced by unspecified federal authorities.

Buying votes is punishable with up to five years in prison. Fifteen State Duma deputies with the Communist Party on Monday signed a formal request to Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev, asking him to investigate the incident. Other opposition parties also criticized Agashin and called for measures against him and United Russia.

Senior Communist official Sergei Obukhov [said](#) Agashin's actions amounted to abuse of office, which carries a maximum sentence of seven years in prison, RIA-Novosti reported.

A senior official with United Russia, Sergei Zheleznyak, said Monday that the city manager was not acting on party orders.

"The idea to tie funding for veterans organizations with United Russia's vote results is Agashin's own," Zheleznyak said in a statement.

Agashin, who is a member of United Russia's general council, also attempted some damage control on Monday, [telling](#) the Izvestia daily that the initiative was entirely his own and implemented while he was off-duty.

He added that he had been trying "to find a solution for the financial problems of the veterans organizations."

Vedomosti reported in October that all regional United Russia officials were, indeed, tasked with ensuring a minimal percentage of votes for the party, ranging from 50 percent to 65 percent, depending on the party's popularity in the given region. The party denied the report at the time.

Agashin, 35, became the city manager for Izhevsk, a city of 628,000 in the Urals, in 2010. Before that, he was a secretary for United Russia's regional council and Udmurtia's top transportation official.

He has proved himself capable and energetic at his current job, said Alexander Mokshanov, who heads the Udmurtia branch of opposition party Yabloko.

"But he's gone too far," Mokshanov said by phone.

The [blogosphere](#) seemed to agree, riled into action by whistleblower Alexei Navalny, a sworn enemy of United Russia, which he had christened with the now-widespread name "the party of crooks and thieves."

Agashin's own LiveJournal [blog](#) had garnered 1,900 comments denouncing his remarks late Monday, a day after Navalny reposted the video of his speech and provided a link to the city manager's blog. "Let's sink the shameless party of crooks and thieves," one comment said.

Such violations are widespread but rarely exposed, Alexander Kynev, a regions analyst with the Foundation for Information Policy Development, said by phone. Commenting about the backlash, he said: "It's an indication of the rise of civil protests and evidence that the Internet is becoming a powerful weapon."

Mokshanov, of Yabloko, agreed that there was "nothing surprising" in the story. "Everyone [at United Russia] receives a plan to carry out at the elections, and it's up to the bureaucrats to find a way to fulfill it," he said.

United Russia now finds itself in a tight spot because a decision to protect Agashin would deal a serious blow to its own image in the eyes of pensioners who support the party, Kynev said.

What lies in store for Agashin remains unclear. No law enforcement official commented on the matter, and both the Kremlin and the Central Elections Commission kept silent.

The deputy speaker of the Izhevsk city legislature, Vasily Shatalov, said he saw no reason for Agashin to step down over the video. "If a court rules that laws were violated, then we'll decide," Shatalov told Interfax.

But the opposition pledged to push for legal action against Agashin and United Russia.

"They have spit in our face, and if we swallow this insult, they will wipe their feet on us," Mokshanov said.

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