

United Russia in Election Ad Trick

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November 07, 2011



Billboards by United Russia, at top, and the Central Elections Commission on 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Ulitsa. **Igor Tabakov**

In a seemingly sinister attempt at subliminal advertising, United Russia has been plastering the city in campaign posters that are nearly identical to ones used by elections officials to encourage people to vote in December.

The billboards all feature dark-blue silhouettes of a family with two kids, an elderly couple and new parents with a baby carriage in front of a light-blue silhouette of the city skyline.

One of United Russia's billboards bears the slogan "We preserve — for life, for people," while one of the billboards hung by elections officials declares "Get out and vote!" and another "Vote for Russia! Vote for yourself!"

The only difference is in the upper left-hand corners, where the official one has the date of the State Duma elections — "Dec. 4" — superimposed on the Russian flag while the other bears the United Russia logo and reminds voters to check box No. 6 on their ballots.

The uncanny similarity between the two has opponents grumbling and observers questioning whether the posters cross a legal — or at least ethical — line.

United Russia officials, however, said there was nothing wrong with the party's advertising campaign at all.

"I can assure you that there is no law violation here ... [and] that we have all the necessary permissions to do it," senior United Russia Moscow City Duma Deputy Andrei Metelsky told The Moscow Times.

Metelsky insisted that the party had bought the copyright for the "image" on its billboards from a Moscow marketing organization. He declined to name the firm, citing "commercial secrets." But Metelsky did say "we are not the only ones who use the copyright for this image."

The election campaign for political parties officially kicked off Thursday, while the information billboards about the elections ordered by the Central Elections Commission and the Moscow City Elections Commission — a separate body — appeared earlier.

Yevgeny Kolyushin, a member of the Central Elections Commission, said that if the official and the party's billboards were really identical, the commission was "risking" being accused of "campaigning" for United Russia.

Kolyushin has no right to speak for the whole commission and stressed that he was expressing his personal opinion.

He said the commission is empowered to assess possible election violations following a complaint or on its own initiative, but he refused to say whether they would look into United Russia's billboards.

According to the Administrative Offenses Code, officials can be slapped with fines of up to 3,000 rubles (\$100) and state agencies 30,000 rubles for illegal campaigning. Production and distribution of campaign materials that violate election laws can result in fines of up to 3,000 rubles for officials and up to 100,000 rubles for state agencies.

Dmitry Reut, a spokesman for the Moscow City Elections Commission, said by telephone that "at first sight, there is no violation of election laws, although there may be copyright violations."

He said his commission's banners were placed around the city by IMA-Consulting, a Moscow-based public relations agency, which had won a bid to do it. An e-mail to IMA-Consulting went unanswered Monday afternoon.

Independent election monitors said the ads raised troubling questions.

"[It] violates the principle of equality of all parties in the elections because one party uses a resource that gives it an advantage over other parties," said Grigory Melkonyants, an expert with Golos, an independent elections watchdog.

"Even though United Russia's billboard has some differences, the voter will, all the same,

associate elections with United Russia,” he said. Melkonyants said it seemed sure that the similarity between the two advertisements was intentional and “in no way an unfortunate accident.”

He said it was not the first time that United Russia had used “someone else’s design of billboards in order to be associated with other organizations.”

Andrei Buzin, another expert with Golos, who was a member of the city’s elections commission until 2009, said that during his seven years there, both the commission and United Russia used IMA-Consulting services for their billboards and they always turned out to be similar.

He called the commission’s billboards “indirect campaigning” and said that while election laws banned state agencies, and specifically election commissions, from doing that, “no court” would move against the practice because the billboards didn’t fall under the legal definition of “signs of campaigning violations.”

But Vadim Solovyov, a State Duma deputy and head of the Communist Party’s election campaign, said the similarity of the ads could mean that the party “violated election laws by attracting state money.”

Using illegal financing for campaigning is punishable by a fine of up to 2,500 rubles for a candidate and 20,000 rubles for a party. Providing illegal financing to someone’s campaign can earn a fine of up to 3,000 rubles for officials and up to 30,000 rubles for state agencies.

Solovyov also said United Russia might have violated copyright if elections officials didn’t authorize it to use a similar design.

Oleg Mikheyev, head of A Just Russia’s election headquarters, called the “promotion practices” of United Russia “inappropriate” and said they were “nothing other than the programming of people to vote for a certain party.”

“Of course, such billboards violate the law, but it is impossible to prove,” he said.

“United Russia’s lawyers have coped with many similar accusations,” Mikheyev said.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/07/united-russia-in-election-ad-trick-a10657>