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Voronezh Officials 'Pressured' to Vote

By Alexey Eremenko

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Regional officials in Voronezh have asked subordinates to confirm in writing that they will vote for the ruling United Russia party in the State Duma elections on Dec. 4, Kommersant reported Monday.

A representative of the regional government contacted by The Moscow Times denied knowledge of such signature collecting but conceded that, if proven, it may constitute a violation.

A copy of the alleged signature list published by Kommersant starts with a quote from Alexei Gordeyev, the Voronezh governor who tops United Russia's electoral list in the region. The quote credits United Russia with "improving life on all fronts" and asks the signees to confirm their support for the ruling party by filling in the fields below, providing their full names, home addresses and phone numbers.

Senior officials at Voronezh City Hall and the regional government told their immediate subordinates to "strongly urge" officials down the chain of command to sign up with their

families, the daily reported, citing several unidentified midlevel officials.

A Voronezh government official said by telephone Monday that collecting signatures of support does not constitute a violation per se because it is practiced by many organizations, from retail chains looking to hook up new customers to all political parties.

But if the lists were really handed down by senior officials, that may constitute abuse of office, said the official, who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to comment to the media. He said no investigation or other type of check has been opened.

"Nobody ever asked the officials to campaign for the party," United Russia member Vladimir Netyosov, deputy speaker of the regional legislature, said by telephone. He added that reports claiming otherwise were "insinuations" by United Russia's unidentified opponents and that the signature lists were a normal campaigning tool used by all parties ahead of the elections.

Meanwhile, a regional official faces a fine of only 3,000 rubles ($100) after he was caught on video telling local veterans' organizations last month that funding for them and their municipalities would depend on how many votes United Russia scored in their districts.

The official, Denis Agashin, city manager for Udmurtia's capital, Izhevsk, has refused to step down after the video was leaked, although United Russia has distanced itself from him. On Monday, the regional elections committee forwarded his case to police, asking that Agashin be fined the 3,000 rubles for illegal campaigning, an administrative offense, Interfax reported.

Opposition parties say his actions amount to abuse of office, punishable with up to seven years in prison, but no criminal investigation has been announced.

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