

Crooks Ads Seen As Anti-United Russia

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In a perhaps not-so-well thought-out decision, authorities in Siberia have ruled that political ads denouncing "crooks and thieves" could only be interpreted as an attack on the ruling United Russia party.

The slogan "For Russia Against Crooks and Thieves" was included on posters that the newly oppositional party A Just Russia placed on 30 buses and shuttle buses in the city of Novosibirsk, party activist Alyona Popova said Monday.

But the city-owned bus company, PATP-5, later ordered the ads down because they were "agitation against United Russia" ahead of Dec. 4's State Duma vote, Popova told The Moscow Times.

Popova [posted](#) a copy of the written violation on her blog Sunday.

The slogan is based on the catchphrase: "United Russia is a party of crooks and thieves" — introduced in February by whistleblower Alexei Navalny that has caught on with

the opposition.

The banners had been removed from 16 shuttle buses by late Monday, Popova said by telephone.

Moreover, bus drivers were fined 5,000 to 7,000 rubles (\$160 to \$230) for having the banners up, she said.

Advertising agency Avatar, which posted the banners, said A Just Russia will have to sue to get back the money it paid for the posters, Popova added.

The removal of the ads was instigated after Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Novosibirsk last Tuesday, unidentified officials from A Just Russia [told](#) Sib.fm. Putin purportedly asked local officials "why such a crackdown on United Russia?" the news agency said.

Putin did not comment on the story. However, the order sent to Popova was dated the same day as Putin's visit.

Legal grounds for the removal remain unclear. A spokesman for the local elections committee said his agency did not examine the ads for violations and filed no complaints about them.

A spokeswoman for the Central Elections Commission said by telephone Monday that election laws had a lot of nuances and that watchdog officials need to examine the Novosibirsk incident to comment. She did not elaborate.

A spokeswoman for United Russia's regional branch said they had "nothing to do" with the banner's removal.

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