The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Report: United Russia in Vote Grab

By Alexey Eremenko

November 23, 2011



A district head in Moscow asked local businessmen to collect absentee ballots for the upcoming State Duma elections from their employees and hand them over to local officials, Gazeta.ru said Wednesday.

The conversation between Alexander Aksyonov, head of the Sokolinaya Gora district in the city's east, and several unidentified entrepreneurs, was captured on audio, the report said.

The man in the recording, available on Gazeta.ru, says that according to "the plan," the ruling United Russia party is scheduled to gather 58 percent of the vote in the district in the Dec. 4 Duma elections.

To help meet the plan, businessmen need to hand over employees' absentee ballots to the district administration, the man in the recording says. Only employees who name United Russia as their pick for the elections get to keep their ballots.

"It's our business what we are going to do with them," he adds about the ballots, which allow

people to vote at any polling station nationwide and are considered by the opposition a vital tool for vote rigging.

A local Orthodox Christian priest "has blessed us [to commit] good deeds," the alleged Aksyonov also tells the audience.

The authenticity of the recording could not be immediately verified. Aksyonov maintained silence Wednesday, and district officials refused comment. Gazeta.ru said the official's actions qualify for vote hindering, punishable with up to five years in prison.

Moscow is a notoriously tough constituency for United Russia, whose support stood at 29 percent here back in October, according to the FOM pollster.

This is not the first election scandal nationwide involving bureaucrats accused of helping out United Russia on the ground. Two officials in Udmurtia were separately videotaped linking funding for local projects with the ruling party's performance at the ballots.

An Orthodox Christian priest in Volgograd said last week that district officials asked him and other local clergymen to promote United Russia from the pulpit, but added that he refused.

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