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4 Duma Parties in Pact, Source Says

By Francesca Mereu

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A United Russia ad shining in an otherwise bleak landscape by the demolished Rossiya Hotel in central Moscow. **Vladimir Filonov**

In a first, United Russia has struck a deal under which the other three parliamentary parties are "pretending to play the opposition" in exchange for guarantees that they will secure seats in the next State Duma, a high-ranking elections official said.

The agreement, which comes amid an all-out drive to secure votes for United Russia, provides an indication that the Kremlin might be panicking ahead of Sunday's elections as it faces an unexpected development: growing discontent with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and United Russia's domination of the political landscape.

The elections official said the three smaller Duma parties — the Communist Party, the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party, or LDPR, and the left-leaning A Just Russia — have agreed not to hinder United Russia from getting the percent of the vote it wants in exchange for a promise that they will clear the 7 percent threshold to win Duma seats.

“Some of them seem to be real opposition, but it is not like that. The truth is that they don’t want to win. They are acting like they are taking part in real elections,” said the official, who is in charge of supervising several technical aspects of Sunday’s elections for the Central Elections Commission.

The official agreed to speak with a reporter because of “disgust” with the elections process but said family needs prevented a change of jobs. The official also asked for anonymity, citing fear of reprisal.

“The only thing that the parties want is to preserve the status quo,” the official said. “They don’t have the will or the strength to fight against the Kremlin.”

According to the official, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov and many party members are “too tired” to fight with the Kremlin.

“Reason No. 1 is they lack a real team. But reason No. 2 is the most important: Why should they fight?” the official said. “To fight with the powers that be, you have to be very strong. Nobody has been able to do that so far.”

As for LDPR and A Just Russia, they are playing “the roles that the Kremlin has given them in this farce,” the official said.

LDPR has consistently voted along pro-Kremlin lines in its nearly 20-year existence, while A Just Russia, co-founded by one-time close Putin ally Sergei Mironov, is widely believed to have been created by the Kremlin to drain votes from the Communists in the 2007 Duma elections.

“A Just Russia seems to be real opposition, but it is not. It was created by the Kremlin and continues to be the Kremlin’s puppet,” the elections official said. “Some individual members are perhaps different, but the head of the party, Mironov, has a clear agreement. It is the only chance they have to get into the Duma again.”

Asked about Yabloko, the official said the liberal party played “too small a role to deserve the Kremlin’s attention.”

As for the other registered parties, they have also been asked to act “professionally” because Putin doesn’t want his name to be smeared in scandal ahead of his bid to reclaim the Kremlin in the presidential election in March, the official said.

“Of course, there will be a lot of complaints after the [Duma] vote, and the parties will scream that the elections were unfair,” the official said. “But this is also part of the game.”

The three smaller Duma parties strongly denied that they made any kind of agreement with United Russia.

Gennady Gudkov, a senior Duma deputy with A Just Russia, called the notion “pure fantasy.”

“United Russia would never make any kind of agreement with anyone, because they have already decided to falsify the elections. This is the only way that they know to win,” he said by telephone.

Sergei Obukhov, the secretary of the Communist Party's central committee, invited a reporter "to get together with the party members" to observe how they are "harassed daily" by the powers that be.

"You should beat the face of the person who said such things," he said.

LDPR spokeswoman Anna Krylova called talk of an agreement "ridiculous" and "absurd."

"We are working 24 hours a day. We are doing a serious work," she said.

A United Russia spokeswoman said she could not comment and asked that an e-mail with questions be sent to the party's press office. The e-mail bounced back with a notice that United Russia's inbox was "full and could not receive any more messages."

But an agreement by United Russia's opponents to surrender without a fight would suggest that the Kremlin is worried about a surge in anti-Putin and anti-United Russia sentiment.

"It was so unexpected for them, and they are panicking now," said a senior official of a town close to Moscow. "Everyone has been given orders to work harder for United Russia."

Even the smallest town in the country is now working hard to fulfill "orders from above to guarantee United Russia a good showing," he said.

Echoing the elections official, he cited "disgust" with the elections as his motivation for speaking with a reporter and mentioned his family as the reason he could not leave his job or go on record with his allegations.

A Putin spokeswoman declined immediate comment about possible electoral manipulations Wednesday and promised someone would call back. No one had called by late Wednesday night.

Panic could be heard in Putin's words Sunday when he warned the West against interfering in Russian elections after formally agreeing to run for president for a third term. At a Soviet-style United Russia congress, Putin said foreign capitals were financing Russian nongovernmental organizations so they could "influence" election campaigning.

"Useless work, wasted money," Putin said, taking a jab at the debt problems of governments in the United States and Europe by adding that it would be "better to use this money to reduce government debt."

Putin's tough words came after two leading pollsters announced that United Russia would lose its constitutional majority in the next Duma. This would mean that Putin, as president, would need to reach a compromise with the other Duma parties to pass any amendments to the Constitution.

This is a scenario that the Kremlin appears to want to avoid at all costs, prompting the authorities to boost their "preventive work" this week, the town official said.

"Regional governments and city administrations are already at work to guarantee United Russia a good showing in the elections. The order has been given at all levels of power, from

the top to the bottom, and has also arrived at private businesses," he said.

Civil servants want to keep their jobs, and businesses hope to avoid reprisals from the authorities, cording everyone from school principals to small entrepreneurs to become engaged in the elections campaign, he said.

Marina, a pediatrician at a Moscow clinic, said she was asked to vote for United Russia because her clinic had been promised more state financing if the party gets a good showing in the district where she works.

Artyom, a small entrepreneur who employs 40 people in a small town near Moscow, said a town official threatened to dispatch tax inspectors to his company if he didn't help in the elections. "That would mean paying money and stopping work, so I did what I was asked to," he said. Artyom and his employees are going to vote for United Russia.

Larisa, a civil servant who works at Moscow City Hall, said everyone who works for the city has been asked to bring a list of at least 10 people they know who have promised to vote for United Russia. "I brought it, I had no choice," she said.

City Hall's press service denied employees had been asked for lists. "There are no such recommendations or restrictions concerning the upcoming Dec. 4 elections for employees from the Mayor's Office," it said in an e-mailed statement.

But if people did promise to vote for United Russia, how would it be possible to check that they kept their word?

The official from the town outside Moscow said it was simple. Usually businessmen and their employees are asked to register at the polling station closest to their work, so authorities can check, he said.

According to reports in the national media, at least one desperate employer has asked his workers to take pictures of their completed ballots as a proof that they voted for United Russia.

"Everyone is under such stress. I really hope that these elections finish as soon as possible — and the way they [the authorities] want," the elections official said.

The Kremlin, the official added, has an "emergency plan" in case things don't work out the way it hopes. "We will use classic fraud. We have been trained how to do it," the official said.

The most common way to rig the vote is to change a polling station's protocol — the record of how many voters showed up and how many votes went to each party, the official said.

Foreign observers, who usually don't understand Russian and read Cyrillic very well, will not notice anything, the official said.

But any fraud might be more difficult to hide from the more than 3,000 Russian observers who will monitor polling stations with the country's only independent elections watchdog, Golos.

Another benefit of this type of fraud is that a court order is required to examine the protocols after an election, and the order is difficult to get, the official said.

Vladimir Churov, head of the Central Elections Commission, said Tuesday that vote-rigging "will be impossible" in Sunday elections.

Thousand observers from different parties will be joined by at least 649 foreign monitors to guarantee a fair vote, Churov said.

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