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Majority Rules in the Duma

By Georgy Bovt

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Initial results on Sunday evening indicated that United Russia would come in with just above 47 percent of the vote. By 1 a.m., it had gotten close to 50 percent of the vote.

The same pattern has been observed in all elections since the early 1990s: The percentage of votes for the ruling party grew steadily as votes were counted moving from east to west. This was the case in the 1993, 1996, 2000 and 2007 elections.

At the same time, many other traditions were broken this year. For example, it was earlier believed that election results in the Irkutsk region reflected voting in the country as a whole. But United Russia won just 40 percent of the vote in Irkutsk this year. This alone demonstrates that something was not right for United Russia this time around.

Because of the peculiar system for allocating votes, the party winning the most votes overall also earns the votes cast for parties that did not clear the 7 percent barrier. And 7 percent of the vote translates into roughly 30 extra Duma seats. Thus, since Yabloko, Patriots of Russia and Right Cause did not clear the minimum barrier, United Russia will add at least a dozen

additional seats.

Some political analysts suggest that the results tend to creep upward in favor of the ruling party as the night draws on because some election observers go home at about midnight, leaving local elections committees free to fudge the numbers.

There is also a widely held belief among political analysts that in about one-third of the regions, the vote is never tallied at all — that results are sometimes simply pulled out of thin air by local officials. Say, for example, United Russia claims that it earned 100 percent of the vote in Chechnya. United Russia leaders and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov could easily back into the desired results by claiming that voters enthusiastically voted for United Russia exactly as reported.

In addition to exaggerating the results for entire regions, reports from numerous election observers posted on Twitter and Facebook indicate that the authorities used a host of old tricks to secure the desired results. These included stuffing ballot boxes with whole handfuls of ballots previously filled out in favor of the ruling party — and sometimes with election observers looking on, knowing that ballot-stuffing goes unpunished. Indeed, there has not been a single case when an election official or politician has been prosecuted for election fraud.

Another favorite tactic is the use of "carousel" voting in which paid workers are bused from one polling place to another, each time voting for the ruling party using absentee ballots. Some political analysts estimate that, with this method, it would be possible to use a single absentee ballot to vote up to 10 or 20 times. This year, 1.5 million absentee ballots were used.

Finally, plain old intimidation of voters works well. It is easy to frighten an entire village into voting for United Russia by telling its residents, for example, that they will not be connected to the gas grid otherwise. And with Moscow first collecting all tax revenues and then allocating funding back to regions and municipalities, another proven method is threatening to withhold financial support to localities that fail to secure the desired number of votes. Given Russia's heavily paternalistic system in which people are dependent on government handouts, that form of "persuasion" is highly effective. During the weeks leading up to the elections, the Internet was teeming with video footage of officials using these methods to intimidate and manipulate voters.

But what would have happened if United Russia received significantly less than 50 percent of the seats in parliament? I believe that many members of the opposition would be upset because they would then have to take responsibility for the legislation the Duma passes. So the large drop in Duma seats for United Russia — from 70 percent to roughly 50 percent — will actually have little impact on United Russia's control of the Duma.

This, of course, suits the Kremlin quite well. Although President Dmitry Medvedev said late Sunday that the drop in United Russia seats will force the party to build coalitions with the other three parties — "democracy in action," as he put it — the Kremlin will prefer to keep it simple by enforcing the majority-rules principle. And simple it will be.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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