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Putin Takes Elections Back To the U.S.S.R.

By The Moscow Times

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The 2011 State Duma elections were among the dirtiest ever. They were also among the most Soviet.

Let's start with the attack on the Golos election monitoring organization, which receives grants from U.S. and EU agencies, before the election. Government-controlled NTV carried out a crude hatchet job under the guise of an "investigative report" that would make the "tele-killer" journalists of the 1990s blush. The NTV program tried to "expose" Golos' supposedly subversive activities that were intended to discredit and destabilize Russia.

The state's reprehensible attack on Golos was disturbingly similar to the Soviet government's campaign in the early 1970s against human rights activist Andrei Sakharov and writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who were viciously attacked as "traitors" in the state media.

Then, on election day, there were hacker attacks against Ekho Moskvy and other liberal media

outlets to try to keep people in the dark about reports of vote-rigging. When we went to these web sites for information, it was a shocking deja vu of August 1991, when the putsch plotters played "Swan Lake" on state television during the height of the crisis.

Meanwhile, Chechnya's election results in favor of United Russia were Soviet par excellence — 99.5 percent.

In answer to allegations of vote-rigging, both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said that anyone who had a complaint of electoral fraud was free to submit the evidence in a court of law. Given the courts' lack of independence, the tandem's comments were seen as a mockery.

Soviet leaders also said citizens were free to use the country's courts to seek justice. They also encouraged Soviet citizens to openly criticize the Soviet system to help improve it — that is, in those few areas where the Communist system needed to be "tweaked" just a tad. The persecution of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn showed how well that policy worked.

When U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for a full investigation into election fraud allegations, Putin accused Clinton of giving Russians a "signal" to stage protests. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's envoy to NATO, said the country's elections were an internal matter only, and any criticism from the United States was "unacceptable."

Soviet leaders said the same thing when Washington criticized the Soviet persecution of dissidents. In fact, the Soviet Union said there were no dissidents.

Finally, Putin, during Thursday's call-in show, repeated his claim that the election protests were part of a Western plan to weaken Russia. This sounds all too similar to the crude conspiracy theories that dominated Soviet propaganda for 70 years.

Putin once famously lamented the Soviet collapse as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." But that's no reason to try to resurrect its methods.

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