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United Russia Gets a Little Help From Its Friends

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Novaya Gazeta published documents last week that are widely believed to have been written by top members of the presidential administration. The documents provide a good snapshot of how an authoritarian regime strengthens monopoly political control while trying to keep the semblance of free elections.

Although the government claims that the leaked documents are fake, they carry all the telltale signs of a Kremlin special operation. The style, content, structure and method all point to the presidential administration.

The documents focus on how to maintain control of regional elections on Oct. 14, in which governors, legislative assemblies and mayors will be elected. All of the Kremlin's administrative resources will be applied in full force, including coercion and intimidation to get people to vote for United Russia candidates. There will also be campaigns to discredit opponents, remove strong opposition candidates from the elections and nominate fake rival candidates. The headquarters for this operation, according to the documents, is in the

Kremlin, which would blatantly violate the Constitution. After all, the Kremlin is supposed to be defending the rights of all citizens and parties, not just the interests of the ruling party.

This strategy for the October elections would once again show that United Russia is in real trouble in the regions. The only way it can win is through coercion, electoral fraud and mass propaganda.

In the Bryansk region, Governor Nikolai Denin is unpopular. Some strong opponents who are supported by the Communist Party come from the ranks of local businessmen. Yet the leaked documents recommend sidelining these strong opponents by coercing the Communist Party to pick a much weaker and less popular candidate.

In Primorye, where the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, summit will be held in September on Russky Island near Vladivostok, Governor Vladimir Miklushevsky is also unpopular. Moreover, there is a bitter fight between political and economic clans in the region. But the Kremlin is apparently most scared by the fact that the APEC summit coincides with the election campaign, which threatens to result in "provocations from the opposition."

The Kremlin faces serious problems in Kaliningrad, where mayoral elections are also scheduled to be held. The recently appointed governor, Nikolai Tsukanov, is not very well-liked by the people, and he's butting heads with Mayor Alexander Yaroshchuk. United Russia is not liked in the city, having received only 25 percent of the vote in the December State Duma elections. Kaliningrad has always been one of the more active regions in terms of anti-government protests, and manipulations of the October vote may spur post-election protesters to take to the streets once again.

In Kursk, municipal leaders will be elected against the background of a harsh internal conflict between factions of United Russia and a conflict between Governor Alexander Mikhailov and the head of the region's United Russia branch, Vladimir Karamyshev. As a result, the leaked document says, "representatives of the acting government are not interested in getting a decent result for the Party." (Throughout the documents, United Russia is referred to "the Party.")

Novgorod Governor Sergei Mitin, an outsider brought in from Nizhny Novgorod by Moscow, is also weak and unpopular, but he is determined to be elected for another term in October. This is exactly why his benefactors are already busy selecting an even weaker sparring partner for him from the Patriots of Russia party.

Mitin has poor relations with everybody, including Duma deputies, federal officials, local security officials and his constituency in the region. That is why they have given the command not to let any strong contenders pass through the "municipal filter," according to local Communists. The governor was unable to set up a competent and cohesive team over the years.

In Udmurtia, elections for the legislature are coming up. For many years, the approval rating of the acting head of the republic, Alexander Volkov, has been only 16 percent. The region has been shaken by numerous corruption scandals. Under these conditions, the administration recommends the introduction of strong methods to control the election results.

Elections for the Tver municipal legislature will also be held amid a deep crisis among Kremlin-favored candidates. The weak Governor Andrei Shevelev, an outsider, has completely discredited city authorities. In neighboring Yaroslavl, new Governor Sergei Yastrebov has neither the trust of the people nor support among the elite.

The widespread unpopularity of regional and local authorities is a direct result of the de facto absence of direct elections of governors and mayors. This is what happens when regional leadership is composed of loyal but highly incompetent functionaries.

The leaked documents from the presidential administration are just the latest reminder of how the Kremlin apparatus and United Russia have been essentially fused into one organization. It may be the only way to keep United Russia alive, but it violates the Constitution and makes a mockery of the Kremlin's proclaimed attempt to build a democracy.

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