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United Russia's Dirty Election Tricks in Barnaul

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who doubles as leader of United Russia, was so happy with his party's win in the regional and local elections held in mid-October in 77 regions that he even made an appearance at United Russia headquarters to congratulate his fellow party members on their success. "It looks like democracy can't scare us," Medvedev said with a big smile.

If one can believe the official data, United Russia made an even better showing in these elections than in the State Duma vote in December 2011.

All five United Russia candidates who took part in these gubernatorial elections came out winners. Of course, these could hardly be called true elections. The real battle was in the Bryansk region, where incumbent Governor Nikolai Denin faced off against Vadim Potomsky, a strong Communist Party candidate.

United Russia dominated the October elections and others before it by employing the same tricks it always uses: corralling state employees to vote the party ticket, stuffing ballot boxes and falsifying the results. When the turnout is high, it is more difficult to tip the balance with such manipulations, but when the turnout is low, such techniques make all the difference. Notably, the October regional elections had a record-low turnout.

From what I observed on the spot, the elections for the Barnaul city legislature were a case in point on how to manufacture good election returns for United Russia. First, voter turnout was only 15 percent. In a city of about 500,000 eligible voters, only 75,000 people voted. Second, the authorities announced a 20 percent turnout, claiming that 100,000 people had voted. That 5 percent tacked onto the top represented 25,000 fictional votes that were attributed to United Russia, thereby significantly increasing its results.

United Russia picked up an extra 15,000 votes in Barnaul through the use of so-called "cruisers," an effective method of ballot stuffing that is practically impossible to investigate or prosecute through legal means.

About 300 cars carrying four or five passengers each drove to one polling place after another. The passengers were mostly college students from rural districts surrounding Barnaul, meaning that most did not even have the right to vote in these municipal elections. Each passenger carried a list of the people in whose names they should vote at each polling station.

The lists of citizens in whose names votes could be cast were prepared beforehand by the district administrations. They keep close track of all the people who live in each district but who have never once shown up to vote. The young "cruisers" carry their names and vote in place of up to 10 unwitting citizens during the course of a single day.

The problem, however, is that it is almost impossible to catch them in the act. At each polling place, cruisers presents their passport to a certain member of the local election commission and are given a ballot in return. Both parties are informed beforehand how to recognize each other, and they use a simple password for verification. If an elections observer attempts to check the name on the passport against the list of registered voters, the elections commission prevents it, claiming that the law protects the confidentiality of information. In most cases, the top leaders of the elections commissions are in on the scheme, and the police always refuse to comply with observers' requests to report instances of falsification. Because the scheme works so well and is so difficult to expose, cruisers are extensively employed throughout Russia.

Some are trying to fight the cruisers using equally illegal methods. In Ryazan, activists tried to stop buses carrying cruisers by puncturing the tires, breaking the windows with bricks or plugging the tailpipe with hard-drying insulating foam. And in Barnaul, when a group of us identified dozens of cruiser vehicles and presented the list to police officers, the cruisers themselves simply continued on their rounds by foot or taxi for the rest of the day. Several school cafeterias were even used to feed them.

In addition, 7,000 votes were generated for United Russia by the party's recruitment of field agents, who are promised 500 rubles for each person that votes. If they bring in 10 people, they pocket 5,000 rubles. How they get the people is up to them. They can ask friends and relatives to vote, bribe others into voting by sharing the proceeds, and so on.

Furthermore, 4,000 votes were obtained by officials' pressuring of groups of state employees, college students and teachers to vote, physically presenting the ballot box only to those who had earlier said they would vote for United Russia. This particular technique is the classic example of how the authorities exploit their notorious "administrative resources."

In regions where the opposition lacks the manpower to monitor every polling place and patrol for cruisers and other tricks, the authorities take the opportunity to use cruder forms of falsification: ballot stuffing by elections commission members themselves, reassignment of ballots cast for other parties to United Russia, eviction of election observers with the help of police and simple falsification of the final tally be rewriting it, among others. In regions like Saratov and Udmurtia, United Russia claimed that it had won 70 or 80 percent of the vote.

By attempting to lower voter turnout and continuing to rig elections, the Kremlin and its main electoral instrument, United Russia, are destroying the very foundations of the state. Society has lost confidence in elections as an institution, and the authorities themselves have lost legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

United Russia likes to boast of achieving high percentages in elections and receiving a mandate from the people. But in reality, very few people vote for ruling party. This leaves United Russia and the Kremlin hanging on a very thin limb.

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