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Litmus Test Election Reveals Flaws

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Administrative building of Zhukovsky **Yevgeny Biyatov**

ZHUKOVSKY, Moscow Region — This town of 100,000 people, 25 kilometers southeast of the capital, elected its mayor on Sunday in an election marred by numerous reports of falsifications and vote-buying in favor of the government-sponsored candidate.

The election was seen as a litmus test of people's trust in the Moscow region's acting governor, United Russia's Andrei Vorobyov, ahead of the gubernatorial election in the fall.

Notably, the town has become an opposition stronghold in recent years, with street protests against the construction of a highway through a local forest, as well as against alleged falsifications in the previous mayoral election for the ruling party's candidate.

Eleven people competed for the mayoral post on Sunday, including candidates backed by the regional government, as well as by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party, A Just Russia, the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party. Two independents also ran. Preliminary results had not been published by late Sunday afternoon.

Reports of electoral violations surfaced before noon Sunday, telling of so-called carrousels, or groups of voters casting ballots repeatedly at different polling stations, as well as of voters getting paid to vote for the ruling party's candidate, and of the removal of monitors who tried to film violations as they occurred.

A Moscow Times reporter witnessed dozens of voters at an office near one of the polling stations lining up to get 1,000 rubles in exchange for a card with governor-backed independent Andrei Voityuk's name on it, allegedly proving they had voted for him.

The Communist Party's regional branch tracked more than 20 such offices in the town in the week preceding the elections, regional Communist lawmaker Oleg Yemelyanov, who was not a mayoral candidate, told the reporter outside the office where the money was paid.

Several days ahead of the vote, at least two video recordings were leaked on the Internet, showing regional elections officials instructing members of district election commissions to distract vote monitors, limit their movement around the polling station, and kick them out under various pretexts should they try to record violations.

A number of elections commission members quit due to the pressure, the region's top election official, Irek Vildanov, told reporters Wednesday.

The two main contenders for the post were Voityuk, officially supported by Governor Vorobyov but running as an independent, and Igor Novikov, a candidate of the Civil Platform party founded by billionaire-turned-politician Prokhorov.

Voityuk, 51, heads the Emergency Situations Ministry's local air rescue center and is reported to have ties to former Emergency Situations Minister and ex-Governor Sergei Shoigu, as well as Vorobyov, whose father was Shoigu's friend.

Novikov, 52, who heads Moscow-based financial firm NVK-Invest and was in charge of the local MAKS aviation show for two years, was reported to have won Zhukovsky's mayoral election in 2009, but the post was handed to United Russia's Alexander Bobovnikov despite complaints of observers about vote-rigging in Bobovnikov's favor.

Bobovnikov resigned in January over a loss of popular support, becoming the first city head to leave for such a reason. Both leading candidates are local residents and made publicized visits to the polling stations Sunday to vote.

Voityuk, mustached and silver-haired, appeared at the Polling Station No. 646 with a group of supporters, including women and children. After voting in front of several photographers and reporters, he talked a little in private to a couple of local residents inside the polling station.

Voityuk refused to tell a reporter how many votes he hoped to get or whom he considered his main contender, but he said he was not prepared to invite Novikov, running for Prokhorov's Kremlin-loyal party, to be his deputy should Voityuk win, like some media reported.

"The time for negotiations has passed. I have my own team," Voityuk told The Moscow Times outside the polling station. "Besides, there is only one prize-winning place at the election."

Novikov, a displeased-looking man with massive facial features, arrived at the combined Polling Station No. 609/610 with his elderly mother, leading her by the arm to the second floor while reporters waited for his return downstairs.

After his mother voted, Novikov passed her to one of his aides and cast his ballot in front of four television cameras and three photographers.

Then Novikov approached reporters and loudly lashed out at United Russia.

"Railroad [their candidate] at any cost — this is exactly the way the ruling party is working, which has not even announced itself here," he said, citing the self-nomination of rock singer Sergei Troitsky, who is reported to be a spoiler running as an independent, and the replacing of Novikov's own observers at the polling stations with observers falsely claiming to represent his party.

Novikov said in a private interview inside the polling station that if not for the falsifications, he was sure he would be the winner, judging by the public moods he witnessed at his meetings with voters.

But voters interviewed or witnessed by the reporter Sunday mostly seemed disappointed with all the candidates and sounded tired.

Communist candidate Alexander Anikanov, 59, a regional lawmaker, and fellow lawmaker and party ally Oleg Yemelyanov were greeted with indignant shouts in the street outside an office where unidentified people paid 1,000 rubles to a voter in exchange for the card supposedly proving he voted for Voityuk.

"You are only asking our opinion to make a show out of it!" a middle-aged woman dressed in black shouted at the Communist lawmakers with despair in her eyes.

The woman told the reporter on the verge of tears that she had been working as a house painter for 30 years and was tired of high prices she had to pay for everything.

"I've plainly come to take the money because anyway they have decided everything instead of me," she told the reporter about the vote outcome. The woman refused to give her name.

Another middle-aged woman sent out the Communist lawmakers from a nearby grocery shop, saying, "Leave here!" which provoked laughter among customers and clerks.

Viktor Antonov, 76, wearing a hat with ear flaps and leaning on a stick, told the reporter that he had voted for Communist Anikanov because "there was more order under 'their' rule," he said, referring to the Communist regime during the U.S.S.R.

A 40-year-old man speaking on condition of anonymity said he had voted for rock singer Troitsky because he did not like the other candidates.

But Alexei Orlov, 56, a leading specialist at a local factory, and Lidia Mikhina, 67, a retiree, said they supported Voityuk because they liked that he worked at the Emergency Situations Ministry and was a local resident.

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