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Observer Groups Report Few Major Violations

By Natalya Krainova

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Election observers registered few grave violations at Moscow polling stations for the mayoral vote Sunday before the end of voting hours, marking a sharp contrast with the 2012 presidential vote and the 2011 parliamentary elections, they said.

One hour before the close of polling stations, the Moscow City Elections Commission had received no information about electoral violations from law enforcement agencies, commission head Valentin Gorbunov told a news conference.

"Everything is quiet and calm," he said, Interfax reported.

The disputed parliamentary vote in December 2011, in which observers and opposition activists accused ruling party United Russia of massive fraud, sparked a protest movement by anti-Kremlin groups and leaders like Alexei Navalny that helped pressure the government into reinstating gubernatorial elections in 2012.

Sunday's mayoral election — in which Navalny was a leading candidate — was the first in Moscow since that change in electoral legislation and the first in a decade. Because of its size and significance, Moscow's mayor has the same status as the governor of a region.

Russia's main independent elections watchdog, Golos, said Sunday that it registered "insignificant" electoral violations at 26 of the city's almost 3,600 polling stations by 3 p.m. Sunday.

Some of the recorded violations consisted of various alleged manipulations by elections officials involving voter lists and the restriction of the right of observers to see those lists, the watchdog said in a statement on its website.

However, observers for opposition leader Alexei Navalny reported "multiple violations" and a "trend to [their] growth" on Sunday afternoon, said Leonid Volkov, chief of Navalny's campaign headquarters.

The tactics of alleged violators varied, according to observers. Some vote monitors saw elections officials carrying voter lists out of polling stations to make notes on them. In some cases, apartment buildings were missing from the voter lists altogether. Some voters arrived at their polling stations to find their names on the lists of voters casting their ballots at home, although they had not requested to do so.

At one polling station, the head of the district elections commission attempted to give election workers 300 ballot papers for 50 voters who were supposed to vote at home. A suspected "carousel," a term for a group of voters that travels from one polling station to another with absentee ballots and votes repeatedly, was witnessed at a temporary polling station in a hospital.

Some people who voted at home received brochures saying that Navalny was a suspect in several criminal probes, while some pensioners voting at home thanked acting Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, the heavy favorite in the vote, for presents and packages of food.

Observer group Grazhdanin Nablyudatel, or Civic Observer, described the atmosphere at Moscow's polling stations with regard to electoral violations as "rather calm" by 3 p.m. Sunday, seven hours after the start of voting.

Most of the violations were registered during absentee voting at home with social-security departments submitting lists of absentee voters to elections commissions and observers discovering "fake applications" from absentee voters, the group said in a statement on its website.

In many cases, elections officials prevented observers from reading the brochures containing lists of voters, the group said.

"There are rather a lot of violations, but few of them are serious," Igor Yakovlev, spokesman for liberal opposition party Yabloko, told Interfax, citing calls on the party's hotline from observers and members of election commissions.

Most of the more than 4,000 complaints registered by Yabloko as of 3:30 p.m. Sunday concerned cases of voters finding their names on lists of people voting with absentee ballots

when they came to vote in person, Yakovlev said.

Many observers from the Navalny campaign complained that elections officials refused to provide them with voting protocols, which list the number of votes each candidate received at a polling station, before they were examined and approved at the elections commission.

Other observers reported the "blowing up" of the lists of absentee voters, with one example including election officials visiting 300 voters at their homes within 1 ? hours, Navalny campaign chief Volkov said.

Navalny's headquarters also registered a first refusal by a court to consider their "well-founded" complaints, Volkov said.

Half-a-dozen observers interviewed by a Moscow Times reporter on early Sunday afternoon at two polling stations housed in school 790, outside Yasenevo metro station, said they had witnessed no violations thus far on election day.

But one of them, Andrei Kuvyrtalov, representing the Communist Party, said that a few days before the vote, observers had trouble with their official registration with elections commissions and with getting absentee ballots to vote at the polling stations where they would be monitors.

Two days before the vote, when most observers had received official references allowing them to monitor voting, the Moscow City Elections Commission changed the rules for writing such references and observers had to "rewrite their references hastily," Kuvyrtalov said.

The number of absentee ballots was drastically reduced this year, compared to last year, "under the banner of fighting carousels," which did not allow many observers representing the political opposition to vote at all, Kuvyrtalov said.

In the Yasenevo district, just 100 absentee ballots were issued for Sunday's vote, compared to 3,000 for the March 2012 presidential elections, the observer said.

Civic Control, a nongovernmental group, registered just a handful of complaints about violations at the city's polling stations. Among them were two reports of non-functioning video cameras for online monitoring of the vote.

Almost 400 people had contacted Civic Control by 4 p.m., but most of them were asking for consultations about voting procedures. Another NGO, For Clean Elections, received about a hundred similar appeals, Interfax reported.

Non-public polling stations, such as those located in hospitals and detention centers, are often the site of more alleged violations.

But on Sunday, observers registered no voting violations at all of Moscow's seven detention centers, Sergei Tsygankov, spokesman for the Moscow branch of the Federal Prison Service, told Interfax.

More than 2,200 detainees voted under the supervision of observers representing political parties, the prosecutor, Moscow's Public Monitoring Commission, the Public Chamber

and mass media.

"They made no serious complaints or reports about violations," Tsygankov said.

However, at an unidentified Moscow mental hospital, election officials walked around with a ballot box accepting ballots from patients in the absence of observers, Moscow's top elections official Gorbunov said, Interfax reported. The patients' votes would be considered invalid, he said.

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