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Air Guns and Tear Gas on Election Trail

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In a sign of parties losing their cool ahead of this month's regional elections, the ruling United Russia party has accused the Communists of trying to stage an attack on its campaigners with air guns and pepper spray.

The incident took place Tuesday in Arzamas, a town in the Nizhny Novgorod region, whose Mayor Anatoly Migunov said the attackers traveled in a minivan with Communist Party emblems, Interfax reported.

The victims, also in a minivan, comprised a group of young local athletes who were mistaken for United Russia campaigners, United Russia said on its web site.

A 19-year-old athlete was lightly injured in the knee from an air gun, Migunov said, adding that a street surveillance camera recorded the incident.

Thirteen attackers beat up the athletes and demanded that they hand over campaign materials that they didn't have, Lifenews.ru tabloid said.

Migunov said there were 10 attackers and eight victims. Local legislator Alexander Vainberg

said the athletes, all wrestlers, came under fire for trying to resist.

A Communist Party candidate in the elections to the Nizhny Novgorod regional legislature, slated for March 13, was among the attackers, a spokeswoman for the local branch of United Russia told Lifenews.ru.

The Communists called the allegations a provocation aimed at disrupting party leader Gennady Zyuganov's visit to Arzamas on Wednesday, Interfax reported. Zyuganov's spokesman Alexander Yushchenko said it was actually Communist activists who had lost campaign materials to a dozen thugs Tuesday. He did not mention any shooting.

Zyuganov's meetings with Migunov, Arzamas legislature Speaker Mikhail Busin and students of a local teacher's college were canceled after the scandal, Yushchenko said. The party has "trustworthy information that the rector had come under pressure," Yushchenko said.

The Investigative Committee opened a check into the incident, Lifenews.ru said. The agency's representatives did not comment on the incident Wednesday, but an Arzamas police officer confirmed to the tabloid that police suspect the Communists were behind the attack.

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