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Strippers and Fraud: Kremlin's United Russia Sweeps Local Votes

By Alexey Eremenko

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776 violations were reported nationwide during the campaign.

The pro-Kremlin United Russia party swept most of 6,024 local polls conducted nationwide on Sunday amid the usual flurry of violation reports, and scandals over everything from discounted vegetables to topless activists.

United Russia won 28 of the 30 gubernatorial seats that were up for grabs, including in the city of St. Petersburg and the regions of Krasnoyarsk, Primorye and Nizhny Novgorod, the Central Election Commission said Monday.

The party of power did not field a candidate in the southern Oryol region, paving the way to a Communist victory. In Kirov region, incumbent Nikita Belykh, a Kremlin-endorsed liberal, won as an independent.

United Russia also clutched the majorities in all 14 regional parliaments that were reelected

on Sunday, including in Tatarstan, Volgograd region, Moscow and the newly annexed Crimean peninsula.

Only United Russia and the pro-Kremlin national populists LDPR made it into the Crimean parliament.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry slammed the Crimean vote, saying in a statement Sunday that the "so-called elections ... are illegitimate and their results null and void."

Meanwhile in Moscow, five of 45 seats in the City Duma went to the Communists, who only had two seats in the previous term.

Communist candidates trounced strong rivals from A Just Russia, the fiercely pro-Kremlin leftist party viewed widely as a spoiler for the Communists.

Serious opposition challengers were weeded out of the nation-wide gubernatorial and Moscow City Duma races in the early procedural phases.

In total, 776 violations were reported nationwide during the campaign, according to independent election monitor Golos.

The figure stood at 747 during the previous "unified election day" last September, when almost 7,000 local elections took place.

Many of the violations pertained to Golos itself. The watchdog faced unprecedented pressure from the state after reporting allegations of widespread fraud during the federal elections in 2011 and 2012, which reinforced United Russia and President Vladimir Putin's grip on power, but at the cost of the biggest street protests in two decades.

Golos reported many instances of its representatives being rejected from polling stations on Sunday — despite having the requisite credentials — based on complaints by the watchdog's arch-nemesis, the Central Election Commission.

Addressing Golos' violation claims, Moscow's chief electoral commission officer Vladimir Gorbunov said: "They're making it up out of thin air," in comments carried by TASS.

The Communists got creative in their efforts to ward off violations, by bringing out impersonators of Soviet leaders Stalin and Vladimir Lenin to Moscow polling stations on Sunday, a move they said aimed to ensure fair play.

Authorities in Moscow also struggled to boost voter turnout, which ended up at a dismal 21 percent, the lowest in 25 years of free elections in the capital.

Incentives for Muscovite voters included discounted vegetables and sausage sold next to polling stations, RBC news website reported.

The food offers have a political tinge these days because of food sanctions Russia imposed against Western producers over their support of Ukraine.

The growth of food prices in Russia reached double digits in August due to sanctions,

according to the State Statistics Service.

Meanwhile, anti-Kremlin forces struck at a polling station on central Moscow's Kotelnicheskaya Naberezhnaya, where three young women bared their breasts, which were painted in the blue and yellow tones of the Ukrainian flag.

The women, who started shouting "Glory to Ukraine!," were marched off within seconds, according to grainy surveillance-cameras footage uploaded to YouTube.

They got off with fines of 500 rubles ($13) each, tabloid Lifenews.ru reported.

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