

United Russia in Trouble

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While President Dmitry Medvedev drivels on about “freedom being better than no freedom” and the world tries to understand why long-standing Arab dictatorships collapsed overnight, Russia’s corrupt autocracy continues to do what it does best: manipulating and falsifying elections.

The regional and municipal elections on Sunday are just the latest example.

This was essentially the dress rehearsal for State Duma elections in December. It showed that the country’s corrupt ruling bureaucracy — with United Russia playing the role of the bureaucracy’s party of power — will use every dishonest and illegal trick in the book to preserve its monopoly on power. Golos, an independent election watchdog, recorded violations in practically all 12 of the regions that voted for regional legislatures, in the elections of 10 regional capitals and in voting for municipal offices in many regions.

On the eve of the elections, United Russia central executive committee head Andrei Vorobyov confidently predicted another crushing victory for the party. His explanation for the optimistic forecast speaks for itself: “Our leadership strength is indisputable, and our

programs are the most substantial.”

Let’s take a closer look at United Russia’s “substantial programs”:

Regional and local authorities — all United Russia members — have purged their most outspoken and critical rivals from the field of candidates and party lists well in advance of the December elections. Once again, the main victims of that process were independent candidates and members of parties without seats in local legislatures. In all, 60 percent of such candidates and 40 percent of independent candidates in regional legislatures were not allowed to register for the elections.

For example, in the Tambov region, Yabloko’s candidate was denied registration, along with all nine of the party’s district candidates. In the Kursk region, only one of Yabloko’s 11 candidates was registered, and in the republic of Adygeya, which is enclaved within the Krasnodar region, only two Patriots of Russia party candidates were allowed to register. Both the Yabloko and Right Cause party lists were excluded from participating in the Stavropol municipal elections, and Yabloko candidates were similarly shut out from elections in Vladimir, Kaliningrad and Syktyvkar.

In all, hundreds of candidates across the country were denied their constitutional right to participate in elections. As before, election officials rejected candidates by unfairly disqualifying their signature lists and by conducting a meticulous search for technical and typographical errors in their registration forms.

At the same time, the barrier to registering a political party was raised from 5 percent to 7 percent in the Nizhny Novgorod, Orenburg and Tver regions, while a long-term campaign to eliminate mayoral elections continued as residents of Stavropol and Khanty-Mansiisk were the latest municipalities to lose the right to directly elect their mayors. The residents of Perm and Vladimir lost the same right a short time earlier.

During the election campaign, candidates from parties other than United Russia were not permitted to rent premises for meetings with voters, media outlets refused to run their ads, and their fliers and posters were torn down or painted over. United Russia once again dominated the television airwaves, barraging viewers with reports of how much United Russia has accomplished for the public good in recent years. As in previous elections, United Russia is pressuring the heads of schools, hospitals and other state institutions to vote for the party of power.

In Vladimir, regional television aired a program called “We Listen to Everyone” in which only United Russia candidates participated. In the Komi republic city of Inta, local authorities banned a rally by opposition members, citing concerns over a flu epidemic. United Russia has also been showering worthy causes with budgetary funds, labeling such gifts as “assistance from the United Russia party.” Kemerovo Governor Aman Tuleyev gave poor families up to 4 tons of heating coal each, which was presented as “United Russia support for the needy.” And while Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov was meeting with voters in Kursk, he was drowned out by the noise from a disco organized by United Russia. What’s more, Mironov was pelted with a sack of feathers.

With “substantial programs” like these, it was a foregone conclusion that United Russia

would win in Sunday's vote. But what is most interesting is that even these once tried and true manipulations aren't working as well as they used to. In seven of the 12 regions in which legislative elections were held Sunday, United Russia got most, but not the majority, of the votes. In the Kirov region, for example, United Russia got less than 40 percent of the vote, a record low.

This means that United Russia has to think up new and more devious tricks to deceive voters and manipulate the vote. This is the only option available. If United Russia had to rely exclusively on its track record and "political and economic platform" in a free and fair campaign, it would never win a single election.

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