

St. Petersburg Authorities Paid Local Athletes to Beat and Threaten Election Observers – Meduza

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Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency

Officials in St. Petersburg paid members of local sports clubs to intimidate and assault election observers during the city's recent municipal vote, the Meduza news website has reported.

The Sept. 8 vote in Russia's northern capital was marked by widespread violations and irregularities, including ballot stuffing and intimidation of opposition candidates. The head of Russia's Central Election Commission has [said](#) that members of the ruling United Russia party "directly intervened in the electoral process."

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Local sportsmen and athletes used intimidation tactics to prevent opposition-affiliated

election monitors from observing the vote, Meduza [cited](#) monitors, candidates and officials as saying.

Athletes blocked the work of opposition observers and attacked a member of the city electoral commission, the head of opposition leader Alexei Navalny's St. Petersburg office told Meduza.

Anna Boyeva, a candidate from the independent Yabloko party, said that people who introduced themselves as observers from United Russia acted aggressively, ripping a camera away from an opposition observer. Boyeva said she discovered that the "observers" were members of a local youth council who attend a boxing club curated by the ex-head of the district.

Another Yabloko candidate, Ivan Chikhnyaev, told Meduza that unknown individuals threatened opposition monitors by saying they would be taken to slavery in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan.

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Meduza cited unnamed sources as saying that the sportsmen were paid anywhere from 3,000 to 5,000 rubles (\$50 to \$75) for their actions on election day.

The senior coach of St. Petersburg's White Wolves martial arts club, which had some of its members recruited as observers, said sportsmen from across the city were involved in the operations. "I called the heads of other clubs, coaches and trainees. I was told that boys there were recruited as observers. For some reason they asked me: What kind of sport do you do?"

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St. Petersburg parliament member Maxim Reznik told Meduza that sportsmen were paid by local officials, a claim echoed by an unnamed United Russia candidate.

Reznik added that presidential administration officials were also involved in the St. Petersburg election. "[They] came all the time and held meetings in St. Petersburg, trying to delve into every district's problems. They were very scared of the opposition's success in the Moscow municipal elections."

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