

Kremlin Sends in the Clowns to Get Votes

By [The Moscow Times](#)

August 25, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

There were few surprises from last Sunday's municipal by-elections in St. Petersburg except perhaps that Valentina Matviyenko received more than 94 percent of the vote. We expected a more modest 68 percent, the preferred number in these types of Kremlin-orchestrated special operations that authorities present as elections.

At polling stations, clowns offered voters and their families free ice cream, and acrobats performed tricks. We can't think of a more fitting way to describe the circus environment of these elections.

The by-elections were discredited from the very beginning. First, they were secret. Matviyenko announced that she would run in the Lomonosov district and then secretly switched districts after the registration was closed, guaranteeing that real opposition candidates would not be able to run against her. Even the head of the St. Petersburg election committee — and later Matviyenko herself — claimed that they were not aware of the change

of venue.

Second, Matviyenko's running mates included a cloakroom attendant, a railway worker, an unemployed man and two little-known United Russia members.

Finally, the by-elections were held during the sleepy days of August for two main purposes: to make election manipulation easier and to limit the protest vote. Notably, opposition leader Boris Nemtsov went to St. Petersburg and tried to pass out leaflets encouraging voters to vote against Matviyenko, but he was arrested as soon as he came out of the first apartment building. According to Nemtsov, police told him that campaigning door-to-door for Matviyenko is perfectly legal, but campaigning against her is not. The police also told Nemtsov that his anti-Matviyenko leaflets needed to have been financed by Matviyenko's own campaign office to be in compliance with election law.

Now Matviyenko, as Federation Council speaker, will become Russia's third most powerful politician, after the president and prime minister. Formally, Matviyenko must be "elected" by the Federation Council deputies, but, like her municipal elections, there is little question how the vote will turn out.

In Russia's unique form of managed democracy, the country's legislative branch is made up of the State Duma, the Kremlin's loyal rubber-stamp body, and a Federation Council, which Julia Ioffe in her Aug. 24 comment in Foreign Policy aptly called the country's "political retirement home." These two chambers have become a perfect legislative tandem to match the ruling executive tandem.

It was indeed fitting that clowns and acrobats accompanied the Matviyenko elections. Unfortunately, this is just the first act in Russia's political circus that will be repeated on a much larger scale in December and March.

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