

The Dirtiest Elections in Post-Soviet History

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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A distinguishing feature of the State Duma election campaign is that it was held against a backdrop of voters' plummeting confidence in the party of power for the first time since 1999. In another first, voters will cast ballots Sunday amid a slide in support for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and the authoritarian political system he built.

The drop in popularity for Putin and United Russia began between 2009 and 2010 and soon became a precipitous decline. Putin has the lowest rating among educated and prosperous people in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities, and this explains the booing and hissing he recently received from the independent-minded people in the audience at the Olimpiisky stadium.

This political regime has been kept afloat by widespread support for Putin as the national leader — a leader who has almost completely destroyed the credibility and independence of every constitutional institution and practice — parliament, political parties, courts and

elections — and has begun floundering now that the tide is turning against him. Putin and his advisers have begun scurrying about, focusing on trivialities like badminton and amphorae and making one blunder after another. Having lost popular support, they are now trying everything from harassing to ingratiating themselves with the public. Their actions have not only failed to elicit the desired fear and respect from society but have engendered indifference and, at worst, a growing wave of contempt.

Putin's regime is not just rapidly losing credibility: It is becoming ludicrous and obscene.

The main result of these Duma elections has been the profound discrediting of the authorities at all levels — and this is primarily the handiwork of the government itself.

In deep denial over their faltering support, Kremlin officials ordered governors as recently as this summer to secure 65 percent of the vote for United Russia — a figure that will forever be associated with the “party of crooks and thieves.”

However, this fall it became clear that the party of power's actual ratings are far below 65 percent and that its popularity continues to drop rapidly — especially after President Dmitry Medvedev angered many voters by announcing on Sept. 24 that he would switch jobs with Putin next year. No more than 20 percent to 30 percent of the voters in Moscow,

St. Petersburg and other major cities plan to vote for the Putin-Medvedev ticket. Notwithstanding, the Kremlin has only corrected its “Duma plan” downward to 60 percent of the vote.

The result is that this Sunday's elections will be the dirtiest in post-Soviet history. Never before have government officials so openly violated the law on such a scale, so candidly applied administrative pressure and bribed voters and so obviously prepared to falsify election results. The Central Election Commission, along with local elections committees, the police, courts and prosecutors have openly sided with those manipulating the vote and not only refused to press charges against them, but have also become their main defenders and even helpers.

And they are employing every trick and stratagem they know to succeed.

Having prohibited a number of opposition parties from even registering for these elections, officials demonstrated from the very beginning that the contest would be neither free nor fair. As a result, a record low of seven parties are taking part in these elections, four fewer than were permitted in the notoriously fraudulent Duma elections of 2007. United Russia has dominated the airwaves with about 60 percent of the time given to political ads, far surpassing the time allotted to all the other parties combined. The Central Election Commission printed 2.6 million absentee ballots and delivered huge numbers of them to government officials to be used to bolster United Russia's results by as much as 4 percent to 5 percent given a voter turnout of 60 percent.

As early as this summer, governors held pep talks with mayors and district heads, telling them, in effect, to either bring in the votes or hand in your resignations. Those officials, in turn, held countless “orientation” meetings with the local heads of state and municipal agencies and institutions, demanding that they round up votes for the party of power. The

directors of schools, libraries, hospitals, tram and trolleybus depots, public utilities departments and others have applied direct pressure on their employees, telling them to vote “the right way.” Mayors have publicly announced that financial assistance for veterans and approval for gas hookups to homes would depend on the outcome of the voting.

Millions of citizens have been threatened with the prospect of losing their jobs or their bonuses if they didn’t “do their duty” at the polls. Tens of thousands of students have been recruited to help gather absentee ballots, stuff ballot boxes and travel from one polling place to another to vote in the names of the sick, disabled and deceased. Millions of employees are being forced by their employers to take part in this depraved and criminal charade. Countless political “specialists” have been sent to the regions to employ all of their notorious methods of dirty campaigning and counter-campaigning — from calling voters in the middle of the night on behalf of rival politicians to defacing competitors’ billboards.

By Thursday, more than 7,100 documented campaign violations had been posted on the “Map of Violations” (kartanarusheniy.ru) organized by the independent election watchdog Golos. Of that total, more than 1,700 involved government officials illegally using their positions on behalf of a single party (guess which one), more than 1,300 instances of pressuring voters, 660 cases of openly bribing voters and more than 180 instances of abuses by law enforcement agencies. At the same time, more audio and video material chronicling these violations has been posted on the Internet and been seen by more Russians than ever before. And it goes without saying that the Central Election Commission and local elections committees have taken no action at all in response to these documented violations — even when blatant cases aroused public concern.

The main result of these fraudulent elections will not be the official announcement of the results and the allocation of Duma seats to the winners. The main result will be that Sunday’s elections will exacerbate the already deep crisis of confidence caused by the campaign itself. The public will not recognize the results of these dirty elections and, despite all of the authorities’ tricks and manipulations, will not consider the new Duma as representing the Russian people.

The shock caused by the ruling regime’s outrageous excesses will also reflect on the results of Putin’s next “special operation”: the presidential election in March. Lenin once said that a revolution would only succeed when the lower classes no longer wanted to live in the old way and leaders could not continue living in the old way. That bears a surprising similarity to the conditions in Russia that will follow these elections.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition Party of People’s Freedom.

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