

An Insider's Account of Vote-Rigging for Putin

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The election official had a problem.

Workers at his polling station had been stuffing ballot boxes with votes for United Russia all day, he says, but when the votes were counted it still didn't have enough.

So he huddled with the election committee he chaired at the Moscow precinct. The decision: Vladimir Putin's party would get the desired 65 percent. One member objected, but relented when the others tossed his Communist Party a few dozen votes.

The commission chairman spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of losing his job. He also said he could be punished for disobeying orders to report any contact with foreign observers or journalists to the Federal Security Service.

His account closely matches reports by independent observers of rampant vote-rigging during Sunday's elections, in which United Russia maintained its majority in parliament. Amateur videos posted on the Internet also appeared to show falsified ballots spilling out

of boxes at polling stations.

Officially, United Russia got roughly 50 percent of the vote, a significant drop from the 64 percent the party won in the last election. But the reports of fraud indicate it may have lost even more support than those results suggest. Central Election Commission officials said they have received no reports of serious violations but would investigate any formal complaints.

The committee chairman who spoke to The Associated Press said that representatives of the Duma's four main parties got together before the election to negotiate how many votes each would get in district precincts. United Russia initially wanted 68 to 70 percent, but conceded that was too high and settled for around 65.

On voting day, the chairman said, election workers quietly slipped ballots into the boxes, as many as 50 at a time, being careful to keep the papers from rustling and attracting the attention of observers.

He said workers were trained on how to stuff ballots, each a thin sheet roughly the size of standard letter paper. He demonstrated how a stack of up to 30 or even 50 ballots could be folded in half, hidden inside a jacket and slipped into the ballot box without making any noise.

The chairman said there was a limit to the amount of ballot stuffing his committee could do. So district election officials took a few hundred of the precinct's ballots, filled them out for United Russia and gave them to migrant men not on the precinct's rolls. Fake voter lists were substituted for the real ones.

During a tour of the polling station, the committee chairman pointed to a spot along the far wall where he had put chairs for observers. He said one observer was particularly zealous, never leaving the room during the 12-hour voting period, even to use the toilet.

The chairman said he got the police to evict the observer 10 minutes before the polls closed, too late for a replacement to be sent. Election monitoring groups and political parties have complained that their observers were barred from many polling places.

When the votes were counted, United Russia got only about 50 percent, even with all the extra ballots; the chairman said its real support had been about 25 percent. Turnout also was low, another setback for the Putin camp.

But when the chairman reported the 50 percent result to the district election commission, he said, he was told to make it 65 percent in the official report, which needed to be signed by all 15 members of the committee. Turnout was also to be inflated.

Most of the commission members willingly went along with the change, he said, and the one holdout was appeased when a few dozen votes were taken from smaller parties and given to the Communists.

The director of Golos, an independent election watchdog, said chairmen of election committees at polling stations are at the center of efforts to rig the vote and routinely come under heavy pressure.

"Most of the violations we see happen at the local level," Lilia Shibanova said.

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