

Duma Vote on Kamchatka

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"We said it—We did it!" read a United Russia campaign poster pasted to the window of one of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky's buses. Under its caption, the poster showed a steamroller flattening new pavement on a city street.

This past year saw the arrival on Kamchatka of heavy machinery stamped with the logo of United Russia: roads have been repaved, cobblestones laid down, bus stop shelters constructed. White, blue, and red billboards were erected across the city last month.

In the days leading up to the Dec. 4 elections, locals' loyalties fell to one of two political affiliations: those who would vote for United Russia and those who wouldn't.

The day of the Duma vote dawned warm and clear in Petropavlovsk. Roughly half of Kamchatka's voters turned out to the polls. Russia's Central Election Commission released a preliminary report showing that voters here, in comparison with the rest of the country, gave significantly more support to LDPR and less to United Russia, A Just Russia, and the Communist Party.

But some of the most telling votes weren't cast along party lines—or even cast at all. At the polling stations set up in schools and libraries, many people milled around, bought the cakes supplied to feed hungry voters, and flipped through the souvenir books showing Kamchatkan landscapes, but left without claiming any ballots. Many more ducked into the voting booths and drew large X's over the sheets they were provided. "Who did I vote for?" one man told the official taking an exit poll. "There's no one worth voting for. I ruined my ballot instead." The official pursed her lips and made a mark on her clipboard.

"Who did I vote for?" a student said the next day. "For—" She mimed drawing an X, spitting, holding up her middle finger. "I ruined my ballot, of course. That's who."

Of the nearly 250,000 ballots given out on Kamchatka on Sunday, the Central Election Commission reported, 111,000 could not be counted.

Still, they said it and they did it. United Russia held on to enough seats in the Duma to pass any bill with only the party's support. While they didn't retain the high level of voter confidence showed in the 2007 election, they will remain the ruling party.

Campaign posters on city buses are being slowly covered with concert announcements and anti-abortion stickers. Political debates will quiet down until February, when the run-up to the presidential election begins. Meanwhile, the newly paved roads circle black and smooth around the city. "If only elections were every year," someone said, and sighed. "We could get new sidewalks, too."

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