

## Russians blog to highlight fears of election fraud

Alissa de Carbonnel, Reuters

When bloggers posted what they said was a tape of the governor of this industrial region telling local employers to organize "compulsory voting" for Vladimir Putin's ruling party, it caused a stir across Russia.

But no local newspapers or television stations reported the story in Chelyabinsk, a city of 1.1 million people 1,600 km (1,000 miles) east of Moscow.

The governor's office says he has done nothing wrong but the episode highlights a new challenge for the leaders of Russian regions where bloggers are increasingly using the Internet to subvert their grip on traditional media.

Many Russians, long accustomed to allegations of vote rigging and irregularities, shrug their shoulders at such reports before a parliamentary election on Sunday. Most get their news from television stations in thrall to the Kremlin.

But a growing number of Russians are using new media to spread what they say is evidence of dirty campaigning by Putin's United Russia, which is widely known on the blogosphere as "the party of swindlers and thieves."

"If the authorities used to have a monopoly in the information sphere, they no longer do," said Konstantin von Eggert, a commentator for Kommersant FM radio in Moscow.

"This is partly linked to voters' fatigue with always seeing the same faces on television but also with the appearance of a serious, so far unfettered source of alternative news."

Eggert said the increase in Internet criticism was unlikely to translate into significant support for any opposition party in Sunday's election, in which United Russia is expected to secure a reduced majority in the lower house.

But when Putin was booed at a martial arts fight in Moscow, it was online video footage that ensured the story was told.

Videos of alleged dirty tricks have also in a few cases forced officials into a grudging response.

"Fast-spreading news of violations are vital because people see in them a confirmation they are not alone in injustice," said Grigory Melkonyants, the deputy director of Golos, an independent organization that monitors voting.

"With the videos that get the most hits, people see that they also have a way to put pressure on the authorities."

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

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### REGIONS COMPETE FOR STATE HANDOUTS

Political analysts say the centralization of power under Putin during his eight-year presidency until 2008 encourages abuses because many regions compete to secure the highest vote for United Russia -- a show of loyalty they hope will be rewarded by a bigger share of state handouts.

President Dmitry Medvedev, who is stepping aside so that Putin can return to the Kremlin in a presidential election next year, dismissed talk of electoral fraud in October.

"I am certain that there will be victory (for United Russia) and that it will be secured by legal means," he said.

But opinion polls show Russians have grown wary of tactics which hark back to Soviet times, and United Russia faces accusations of using state resources to win over support in industrial strongholds such as Chelyabinsk.

The audiotape shows a man who bloggers say is Chelyabinsk Governor Mikhail Yurevich telling businessmen: "Ordinary people don't care who they vote for. I ask you all to do what you can to motivate your employees to support the party."

More votes will mean extra cash for the region, the man says.

Viktor Strootz, who posted the recording online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF7Dw8q\\_X1U&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF7Dw8q_X1U&feature=related), told Reuters 20 officials were present at the meeting but would not say who leaked him the audio files.

The governor's office said Yurevich had met the businessmen to speak about the elections but called the accusations against him a "fairy tale." A dozen journalists and bloggers said they believed the voice on the tape was that of the governor.

Chelyabinsk is marked as a big red blot of discontent on an online map of alleged violations prepared by Golos which says it has already received about 3,000 complaints.

Last month businessman Konstantin Korovin blogged that the top municipal official in the once closed city, which was built around tank, metallurgical and weapons facilities, had told employers to pay workers to vote for United Russia.

If the employees refused bribes of up to 2,000 rubles (\$64), a lot of money in a region where salaries average 19,000 rubles a month, companies would be ordered to make Sunday a working day, Korovin quoted the official as saying.

Korovin, 34, whose blog can be found at [Korovin74.livejournal.com](http://Korovin74.livejournal.com), said he was so disgusted that he blogged about the meeting, despite the risk of repercussions for his family-run firm, which employs 250 people.

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"Such meetings are a regular staple of elections here but this year the rhetoric has changed," Korovin said. "It has gone from requests and trade-offs, such as building roads for votes, to commands and threats."

In a rare boost for the opposition, a court found a top city official in the western Urals guilty of bribing veterans with state funds for votes after a video spread online. But his punishment, a 2,000-rouble fine, was largely symbolic.

### FIFTY MILLION USERS

Russia's online community was initially concentrated in Moscow but the number of users in the regions is growing, said Annelies van den Belt, the head of SUP media, which owns the country's biggest blogging platform, LiveJournal.

"Three years ago, 70 percent of traffic of our web site was in Moscow and St Petersburg," she said. "Now it's less than 50 percent and our traffic is three times bigger."

Among the new bloggers are journalists in Chelyabinsk who say the traditional media are tightly controlled by the regional authorities led by United Russia.

The Chelyabinsk Worker newspaper considers itself independent. But Irina Gundareva says she and five colleagues started blogs in August to publish what editors refused to print for fear of falling out with the authorities.

"LiveJournal is the only place where you can read the truth about Chelyabinsk," she said.

ComScore, an Internet marketing research company, says 50.8 million Russians -- more than a third of the population -- are online, and they are the world's most active on social networks.

"Bloggers aren't just people voicing their ideas online. Today they are themselves a source of news for media across Russia," said Anton Bakhayev, Chelyabinsk's head of youth politics.

His decision to launch a state-funded school for bloggers, taught by a member of United Russia's youth group Young Guard, met fierce criticism online and was dismissed as a government effort to form its own army of loyal bloggers.

### PRESSURE ON VOTERS

In Chelyabinsk's snowy city centre, filled with bright new shops and cafes erected on the back of demand for the metals the region produces, residents resent what they see as efforts by United Russia to tell them how to vote.

"I work a utilities firm so whether I want to or not, I have to vote," Andrey Mirankov, 45, said. "I'm under orders from my boss or I'll be blacklisted at work."

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United Russia posters monopolize the city billboards, while opposition parties have resorted to hanging banners from the balconies of Soviet-era apartment blocks.

Engineering student Vadim Yumakhuzhen, 20, said he was "revolted" by United Russia's campaign methods. Elina, a 19-year-old medical student, said: "I won't vote for them out of principal because we are being forced too."

She said students in her dormitory were told they would be given concert tickets if they photographed their ballot papers to prove they voted for United Russia and that party activists threatened "consequences" for those who opted out.

(Reporting by Alissa de Carbonnel, Editing by Timothy Heritage)

**Posted by Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor**

**Source URL (retrieved on 04/19/2014 - 12:25am):**

<http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2011/11/russians-blog-highlight-fears-election-fraud>