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EUROPE

Russia's Dubious Vote

Analysis of Parliamentary Results Points to Widespread Fraud

By **GREGORY L. WHITE** And **ROB BARRY**

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Results from Russia's parliamentary vote earlier this month are studded with red flags that suggest broad electoral fraud, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis.

A comprehensive examination of the full results from Russia's nearly 100,000 voting precincts reveals statistical anomalies that experts say are consistent with widespread vote-rigging. These irregularities could cast doubt, by one rough measure, over as many as 14 million of the 65.7 million votes reportedly cast.

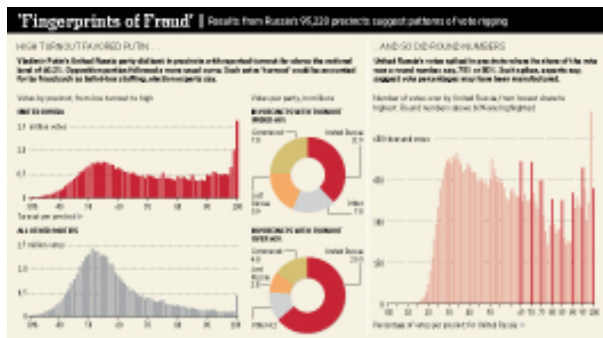


Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev, right, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin attend a State Council meeting of heads of Russia's entities in the Kremlin in Moscow on Dec. 26. *AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party captured a high share of voters—far above the 49.3% it received nationwide—in precincts where voter turnout was reported to be well above the national average, according the analysis. That dynamic suggests broad ballot-stuffing, according to experts in vote monitoring. In

addition, the analysis revealed a second anomalous pattern in the results they said is also consistent with doctored results.

The analysis doesn't in itself prove fraud in Russia's Dec. 4 parliamentary elections. But it follows weeks in which local and international observers reported what they said were numerous individual cases of ballot-box stuffing, vote falsification and other violations. It provides the first overall picture that any alleged election fraud could be broad in scale.



Public outrage over alleged irregularities has triggered the biggest street protests since the Soviet Union's collapse, the largest coming on Saturday, when as many as 100,000 people gathered in Moscow to demand Mr. Putin's resignation. The allegations threaten to undermine his government's legitimacy as he prepares to return to the presidency in elections in March.

Kremlin and United Russia officials have repeatedly denied major vote fraud. On Tuesday, Mr. Putin struggled to contain the protests' political fallout, dismissing his opponents as leaderless and seeking to sow instability.

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The Kremlin's shuffle of top officials also continued. President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday removed Vladislav Surkov, the architect of the Kremlin's tightly controlled political system, as deputy chief of staff, appointing him deputy prime minister responsible for modernizing the economy. Mr. Surkov, who helped Mr. Putin gain power in 2000 and then cement his control, was dubbed by critics the Kremlin's "puppet master." Mr. Surkov told the Interfax news

agency that he had asked to be reassigned some time ago and welcomed his new appointment.

"It looks like [Mr. Putin] is nervous," said political analyst Sergei Markov, an ex-United Russia legislator. "A reset of the Putin political system is under way."

Kremlin and United Russia officials say any alleged irregularities were minor and didn't significantly affect the Dec. 4 results, which saw United Russia party narrowly hold its majority in parliament. Kremlin officials have vowed to investigate and prosecute any allegations of vote manipulation.

Russia's Central Election Commission didn't respond to requests for comment on the statistical analysis. In the past, the agency has said similar studies didn't indicate fraud but simply reflected peculiarities of Russia's electoral culture.

Mr. Putin said on Tuesday that to dispel any doubts about the fairness of March presidential elections, the government would install web cameras and transparent ballot boxes at polling places. "We have to do everything to minimize the efforts of our opponents to delegitimize these elections," he said.

For its analysis, The Wall Street Journal designed a computer program to assemble this month's official voting totals from the 95,228 electoral precincts across Russia. A subsequent statistical analysis revealed phenomena that scholars who study vote data say are suggestive of vote-rigging.

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"These are sometimes called the fingerprints of fraud," said Alberto Simpser, professor of political science at the University of Chicago. "If they all point in the same direction," he said, referring to statistical as well as observer and other evidence, "that's a very strong case."

The results are studded with groups of precincts that report exact round numbers for voter participation—say, a turnout of 70%, 75% or 80%, up to 100%. Several groups of precincts also report similarly high round numbers of voters for United Russia. Such

round figures occur significantly more frequently than nearby figures—a phenomenon statisticians say is highly unlikely to come from a random distribution of numbers.

"I've never seen anything like that before," said Walter Mebane, a professor of political science and statistics at the University of Michigan, who has studied previous Russian elections and reviewed the Journal's findings. "The most likely occurrence is that it's just artificially inflated vote totals."

In addition, United Russia's share of the vote at the numerous precincts that recorded voter turnout significantly higher than the national level of 60.2%—over 65% and, in thousands of cases, 100%—was dramatically higher than it was at precincts where turnout was closer to average.

No other party showed such a surge in support at the high-turnout precincts, a phenomenon visible in other elections in Russia since Mr. Putin came to power. The heavy support for the ruling party didn't extend to lower-turnout districts: Just 30 of the 11,567 precincts in which the party took more than 80% had a turnout of under half of registered voters.

"I didn't expect the effect would be so strong," says Andrei Buzin, a specialist on the analysis of vote results at Golos, Russia's main independent election-monitoring group, whose observers reported large numbers of violations.

Scholars point out the statistical studies can't prove vote fraud, and the statistical analysis doesn't show how the possible falsification could have occurred. United Russia's strong performance in high-turnout regions could reflect concentrated pockets of enthusiastic support among disciplined voters.

But other evidence, particularly the peaks around round numbers, are harder to explain, especially given other signs of rigging such as reports from observers. Foreign and Russian observers reported a range of violations, including outright stuffing of ballot boxes by poll workers, "carousels" of voters who cast ballots repeatedly and vote totals that were rewritten by election workers after the initial counts were complete.

Observers and scholars said such manipulation would have inflated turnout figures at the affected precincts. The Journal's statistical analysis showed that at some 23,202 precincts across Russia where reported turnout was over 80%, United Russia captured the support of more than 77% of voters, accounting for 11,064,468 votes.

In the Soviet period, the Communist party routinely reported 100% results for turnout and support in its elections, in which other parties weren't allowed to run. In recent years, similarly high tallies for United Russia have come from Russia's Caucasus and other ethnic regions.

In Chechnya, for example, all but 6,200 of the 614,109 registered voters offered support to United Russia, with 403 of the Caucasus region's 456 precincts showing turnout rates and support for United Russia in excess of 99%. Chechnya fought two wars for independence from Russia over the past 20 years and is now ruled by a Moscow loyalist.

Chechnya also accounted for more than a quarter of the votes United Russia got from precincts where turnout was reported at 99%. Nationally, the ruling party got 1,010,029 of the 1,117,320 votes cast at such precincts.

The results also show irregular patterns in other parts of the country. In the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, precincts are concentrated in two groups: those where United Russia gained around 30% of the vote, and those where it won above 80%. Virtually no precincts reported results in the middle.

“There was a strong protest vote,” says Alexander Kovalyov, editor of a local independent news website. On election night, local officials reported early results showing United Russia with about 37% of the vote with 90% of the ballots counted. Final results that came out days later put United Russia at 57%.

Officials at Golos in Magnitogorsk said they have filed a complaint with prosecutors charging that some of these results were falsified. Prosecutors haven’t responded. Local electoral officials didn’t respond to requests for comment.

There is no reliable way to use the statistical analysis to calculate how many votes were falsified. But a rough calculation that eliminates the unusually high levels of support for United Russia at the precincts with unusually high turnout raises questions about as many as 14 million of the 32.4 million votes that United Russia claimed. That would still have put the pro-Kremlin party in first place, but would have left it well short of a majority.

—Tom McGinty and Nonna Fomenko contributed to this article.

- Behind the Analysis: The Methodology

Russian election authorities post official vote results on the Internet, but not as a single database. To obtain the data for individual precincts, The Wall Street Journal wrote a computer program that downloaded 2,957 web pages posted on Russia’s Central Election Commission website.

Using another program, reporters mined the pages for precinct-level data, extracting outcomes for 95,228 precincts spread across 2,745 electoral commissions. The largest precinct, in Derbent, Dagestan, reported 3,470 votes. The smallest was one vote in Kaspiisk, Dagestan. The average precinct size was 690 votes.

Precinct data was fed to a database that reporters queried under the guidance of several experts in election fraud and statistics. To ensure the integrity of the records, the figures

were cross-referenced with a set obtained by Walter Mebane, a professor of political science and statistics at the University of Michigan, as well as totals reported by Russia's Central Election Commission.

Among the results of the analysis, two elements emerged: extremely high levels of support for United Russia among precincts with high turnout, along with spikes in votes from precincts reporting round numbers—such as 65%, 70% and 75%—in turnout and support for United Russia. These spikes at round numbers were statistically significant, Mr. Mebane determined.

Write to Gregory L. White at greg.white@wsj.com and Rob Barry at rob.barry@wsj.com