

Yanukovych's Party Denies Election Fraud

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KIEV — The party of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych dismissed on Monday any suggestion of large-scale fraud in local elections, rebuffing criticism from the opposition and the United States.

Final official results of voting on Oct. 31 to elect mayors and local councils have yet to be announced.

But Yanukovych's Party of the Regions is far ahead in the count for the elections, the first since he won power in February and seen as an early test of his stated commitment to democracy.

"Violations were neither systemic nor on a massive scale, and they could not have significantly affected the electoral campaign process," Party of the Regions lawmaker Vadym Kolesnichenko said in a statement. "We have lawsuits in five or seven cities, so what? There were 22,000 elections, and there are just five lawsuits."

Washington criticized the elections last week saying they "did not meet standards for openness and fairness set by the presidential elections earlier this year" and cited both procedural violations and legislative shortcomings.

Ukraine's opposition, led by the party of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, has accused the government of rigging the vote, which had an estimated turnout of below 50 percent, and is challenging the outcome in several cities.

The Party of the Regions has secured mayoral seats in two-thirds of cities and towns contested, including 11 of 24 major cities.

Yanukovich has tightened his grip on power since his election and tilted government policy back toward Russia. The parliament is controlled by his supporters, and a court ruling last month significantly boosted his powers.

His critics accuse him of engineering a crackdown on the media — which he denies — and putting pressure on former government members, now in opposition, as well as on informal pro-democracy lobby groups.

A rise in domestic gas prices, at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund, government tax and pension reform plans aimed at cutting the budget deficit have provoked widespread resentment among voters.

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