

Vote Monitors Await Russia's Nod

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Europe's top elections watchdog hopes to send several hundred observers to monitor the State Duma elections, but the Central Elections Commission has yet to respond to a request to send a fact-finding mission in August.

If the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe gets its way, it will be the first time since 2004 that a significant number of European and North American observers are present at a major election in Russia.

The government's response will also send a strong signal about its readiness to let outsiders monitor elections on a larger scale.

The 2007 Duma elections and the 2008 presidential vote were marred by scandal when the OSCE canceled its main observer missions, saying that Moscow had imposed "unacceptable restrictions."

The few Western observers who did monitor those votes said afterward that they failed

to meet democratic standards.

Janez Lenarcic, director of the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, has asked elections commission chairman Vladimir Churov to let a small expert team into the country in mid-August.

The group of up to four experts would reassess conditions for an observation mission for the Duma vote in December, Lenarcic [wrote](#) in a letter to Churov, which was dated June 15 and published on the commission's web site Wednesday.

Commission spokeswoman Anna Fomenkova refused to say Wednesday if and when an official invitation would be made for the expert team.

Lenarcic said in the letter that he could not make a clear estimate on the size and format of the proposed observer mission for the elections, but he noted that the last such assessment in 2003 had recommended sending 460 observers, 60 of them long-term.

OSCE spokesman Jens Hagen Eschenbächer told The Moscow Times that the organization would make a formal decision on sending monitors only after hearing the fact-finding mission's report.

Eschenbächer also said the organization would then discuss the elections commission's rules for international observers.

The new rules, which were [published](#) earlier this month, prohibit observers from making any public comments before the vote is finished.

Over the past few years, Moscow has consistently tried to reduce the number of Western observers. In 2007, the commission limited the OSCE mission to 70 short-term observers, no long-term observers and 30 members of the organization's Parliamentary Assembly. Moscow also refused to allow more than 400 observers in total, a figure that it called "common for civilized states."

Rights groups say the figures were far from sufficient to monitor 95,000 polling stations across Russia.

As an OSCE member, Russia is bound by a 1990 treaty to invite election observers. But it is alone among the organization's 56 members, which include all former Soviet states, most European countries and the United States and Canada, to impose any restrictions.

The Kremlin has long criticized the OSCE's human rights activities and in 2007, then-President Vladimir Putin infamously denounced the organization as "a vulgar instrument" designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one country, presumably the United States.

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