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Western Observers Out, Sports Fans In

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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The Central Elections Commission said Thursday that the number of foreign observers for the State Duma elections should be small because their work could be done from afar and promised to staff ballot stations with football fans.

Commission chairman Vladimir Churov refused to say how many observers would be invited but suggested that he disliked high numbers.

"It's better to use skills over numbers," he told reporters.

He said observers did not necessarily have to be in the country for their work. "Modern means of communication allow election monitoring to be done from a distance," he said.

Restrictions on election observers have created tensions with the West in the past, especially after the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, or OSCE, canceled its mission to the last Duma elections in 2007 after Moscow said it would only let in 100 observers instead of the more than 400 that it had requested.

Churov said a decision about the number of OSCE observers would be made after the organization submits a request.

The OSCE has said it will decide on the size and duration of its mission on the basis of an expert report in September.

OSCE spokesman Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer said by telephone Thursday that the report would be compiled by a three-member fact-finding team that would be in Moscow from Aug. 18 to 22.

Moscow is part of the 56-member organization but has been highly critical of its human rights-related activities.

But Churov said Thursday that relations have markedly improved with the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which monitors elections.

"This is especially because of the personality of Mr. Lenarcic," he said. Janez Lenarcic, the office's Slovenian director, held talks with Churov in Warsaw in May.

Walburga Habsburg Douglas, a Swedish lawmaker and a long-standing member of the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly, said Moscow would send out a negative signal if it set restrictions similar to those of 2007.

"It just gives a strong impression that they have something to hide," she said by telephone from Stockholm.

Habsburg Douglas also pointed out that because of the country's vast size, observer numbers needed to be large.

In 2007, Moscow limited the total number to 400 from a variety of organizations, a figure that rights groups said was insufficient to monitor the country's 95,000 polling stations.

The Western observers who did attend later lambasted the vote as not free and not fair, a view shared by all political parties except United Russia.

Churov also confirmed that his commission has invited football fans to work in polling stations across the country, saying the fans would work in all regions with higher-league teams.

"We will even have a group of special observers from football fans at the Central Elections Commission," he said, adding that the idea originated in the North Caucasus.

In June, the Chechen election committee published a report saying that football fans could help spread information about the elections among young people.

Football fans were propelled to the political center stage after violent clashes with police on Moscow's Manezh Square last December descended into rioting directed against migrants, especially from the Caucasus.

The North Caucasus also has a reputation for dubious election results. In Chechnya, the ruling

United Russia party received 99.36 percent in the 2007 elections.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the opposition Yabloko party, said putting fans in charge of elections was a clear sign that the vote would be an utter farce. "It is a sad fact that this country cannot have elections without falsifications," he told The Moscow Times.

But Churov, who is famous for eccentric remarks and excessive loyalty to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, for whom he worked many years as a deputy in the St. Petersburg city legislature, was adamant that the elections would be fair.

"We won't try to rule out [falsifications], we will rule them out," he said, adding that Russian ballots are the hardest to forge in Europe.

He also claimed that opinion polls have shown that the turnout would be "significantly higher" than in 2007, when just over 60 percent of voters participated.

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