

Probe Greet Duma Vote Monitors

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Less than three weeks before State Duma elections, top elections official Vladimir Churov has signaled his disdain for Western elections observers by announcing an investigation into whether preparations for one observer mission had broken the law.

Churov, who heads the Central Elections Commission, did not specify how the lawmakers from the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, or PACE, might have violated the law during their visit to Moscow last week to prepare their observer mission.

"We are currently looking into the PACE mission's activities," Churov told reporters Tuesday, Interfax reported.

He added that his office has asked the Prosecutor General's Office and the Foreign Ministry to investigate the visit.

The five-member delegation under Dutch Senator Tiny Kox toured the capital for four days upon the invitation of Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov. At a news conference on Friday, Kox

[criticized](#) campaign conditions for parties other than United Russia, although he noted that the situation was better than before Duma elections four years ago.

Kox also complained that Churov had abruptly canceled a meeting with the delegation last Tuesday.

Gazeta.ru reported that Churov's investigation was based on a complaint by United Russia that future elections observers should not make public comments on upcoming elections.

"These representatives have been recommended as observers, and their accreditation is in the works. Their news conference at the very least manifests a lack of respect for our election system," Federation Council Senator Ruslan Gattarov, who heads a United Russia working group that monitors election campaigning, was quoted as saying.

Kox was unavailable for comment Tuesday, but a Council of Europe official rejected the criticism from United Russia by stressing that the delegation members had not been accredited as international observers yet.

"It is a classic scenario in all member countries to send a pre-electoral delegation in the run-up to an election monitoring mission," the official said on condition of anonymity because he was unauthorized to speak on the record.

PACE plans to send a 40-member observer mission to cover the Dec. 4 elections. Much larger missions are being prepared by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE.

The OSCE plans to send a 200-member mission under the auspices of its Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, plus another 100 observers from its Parliamentary Assembly.

A 15-member core team and 40 long-term observers based in 20 regions ranging from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok started their work at the beginning of this month, according to information published on the OSCE [web site](#).

The mission, led by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini, who headed the European Union's fact-finding mission for the causes of the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, will publish a preliminary report on Monday, OSCE spokesman Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer said by telephone from Warsaw.

The OSCE mission did not have a smooth start.

The OSCE had first suggested to send more than 400 observers, but later grudgingly reduced the number first to 260 and then to 200 amid stiff opposition from Churov, who has suggested that foreign observers should do their work from abroad.

Last month, the elections commission refused accreditation for one member of the OSCE long-term observer mission. Dutch journalist Alexander Münninghoff said Tuesday that he was informed about the decision on Oct. 28, two days before he was to arrive in Moscow, and that he has not been given a convincing explanation.

"I am still puzzled," he said by telephone from The Hague. Munninghoff, who was a correspondent for Dutch newspapers in the Soviet Union from 1986 to 1991, has served on some 30 OSCE observer missions, seven of them in Russia. "There never was a problem," he said.

Reached by telephone, an elections commission spokeswoman asked for questions to be submitted in writing. She did not reply by late Tuesday.

OSCE spokesman Eschenbacher said Munninghoff was replaced by an observer from Azerbaijan.

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