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Electoral Mutiny in TV Ad Ban

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A Muscovite waiting at a bus stop sporting a campaign billboard by United Russia. Ads by other parties fared worse, with elections chief Vladimir Churov banning some despite having no power to do so.
Vladimir Filonov

Campaign ads by opposition parties have been banned on state television by order of the head of the Central Elections Commission, who has no authority to do so, Vedomosti reported Monday.

Vladimir Churov's actions prompted a mutiny among the commission's working group, whose job is to review such videos, but which was only asked to do so after they were banned, the newspaper said.

State-owned broadcaster VGTRK announced last week that it was banning videos by Yabloko, A Just Russia and the Liberal Democrats following a letter from Churov, who said he suspected the ads promoted extremism and targeted other parties.

But only police or prosecutors can ban a video, while all the Central Elections Commission is

authorized to do is request that a questionable campaign ad be examined, said the Communist Party's head lawyer, Vadim Solovyov.

Elections officials also only asked the working group — which consists of unspecified media figures and elections experts — to review the videos slated for a ban last Thursday, after they were already de facto banned.

In protest, members of the group refused to make any ruling on the videos, robbing the ban of any expert backing, Vedomosti reported.

Attempts to clarify the matter failed Monday. VGTRK deputy head Dmitry Kiselyov, who oversaw the videos' removal, was not available for comment, his press office said.
A spokeswoman for the Central Elections Commission, when reached by telephone, asked for an e-mailed request for comment, which was not returned in time for publication.

Anonymous Kremlin sources and election officials told Vedomosti that the ban had been arranged by the Office for Presidential Affairs. The office had no comment on the allegations.

One banned ad by A Just Russia accused authorities of hiking utility tariffs faster than state pensions — a move that elections officials ruled fanned hatred toward "persons responsible for such tariffs." By contrast, an online ad by the ruling United Russia party that slammed "An Unjust Russia" dodged prohibition.

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