

PACE Set to Discuss Election Fraud

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Moscow is likely to face a barrage of criticism from European lawmakers next week when the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly — or PACE — plans to hold two debates on last month's disputed State Duma elections.

On Monday, the assembly — made up of lawmakers from 47 member countries — will debate a final report of its election observer mission. Then, on Thursday, the body plans to hold an urgent debate on "Russia between two elections."

The decision to hold the second debate will be made on Monday, but it is "99 percent likely to go forward," said Andreas Gross, a Swiss lawmaker who is the assembly's co-rapporteur for Russia.

Duma deputies have criticized the second debate as unnecessary.

"PACE is excessively concerned about Russia this year," Leonid Slutsky of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party was quoted as saying last week by RIA-Novosti. "An urgent debate is

clearly too much."

Gross countered that the debate was essential.

"There can be no democracy without debate," he told The Moscow Times by phone from Strasbourg on Thursday.

Anger about alleged vote-rigging triggered the largest anti-government protests in years, bringing tens of thousands into the streets.

The PACE's observer mission's final report, which will be published Monday, is expected to criticize the elections as rife with fraud. The mission's head, Dutch Senator Tiny Kox, said the day after the Dec. 4 election that he personally witnessed ballot-stuffing at a Moscow polling station.

Gross said Monday's report won't contain excessive criticism. He said he would be part of a PACE delegation that will hold talks in Moscow this Friday in order to make the report fully objective.

"We do not want to be accused of being informed just from the media," he said.

Among Russian officials that European lawmakers plan to meet are Central Elections Commission chairman Vladimir Churov and new Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin. Churov has previously cancelled meeting with the PACE observers, but a commission source confirmed to RIA-Novosti that Friday's meeting will take place as planned.

The [delegation](#) is also planning talks with all seven parties that ran in the elections and with parties that were denied registration like the People's Freedom Party. They will also meet with human rights activists.

The Council of Europe is the continent's top human rights watchdog and its parliamentary assembly is considered the most high-profile platform for debate between Russian and Western lawmakers.

The Russian delegation, however, won't include members of the newly elected Duma, but will be made up of 14 lawmakers who are members of the country's previous mission, said Valery Levitsky, head of the delegation's secretariat. A new delegation won't be formed before February or March, he said.

Levitsky said delegation chairman Konstantin Kosachyov would not travel to Strasbourg. Kosachyov lost his influential position as the Duma's foreign policy committee chairman to television host Alexei Pushkov last month.

Gross said that while some questioned the Russian delegation's legitimacy, this opinion was not shared by the assembly's majority.

He argued that allegations of election fraud were nothing new.

"There never were free and fair elections in Russia. The road to democracy is a long one," he said.

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