

Election Webcam Installation Begins

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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An official in Stavropol showing what a webcam feed from a polling station will look like during the March 4 vote. **Eduard Korniyenko**

VELIKY NOVGOROD — In this historic city that was once the cradle of Russian democracy, an unprecedented new campaign kicked off over the weekend to install web cameras in every polling station around the country in an effort to prevent voting fraud.

The ambitious program — costing billions of rubles — was ordered by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin following the largest public protests in years in reaction to widespread allegations of ballot box-stuffing and other voting irregularities in December's State Duma elections.

Some experts say the move to live-stream activity around polling stations serves as a strong statement to bloggers and the Internet-savvy who played an important role in whipping up dissent after the disputed ballot preserved a narrow majority for Putin's United Russia in the Duma.

Yet skeptics say the camera initiative will fall far short as there are other ways to cheat. Still, officials say the effort will make a huge difference in promoting fair elections.

"It will have a certain psychological effect for people who come to the polling station. They will feel they are not being cheated," the city's Mayor Yuri Bobryshev told The Moscow Times on Saturday.

In Novgorod region, United Russia took a beating in the December elections — receiving just 35 percent of votes compared with 63 percent in 2007.

At a press event to show the cameras in action at a local children's art center, Communications and Press Minister Igor Shchyogolev recalled ancient Novgorod's development of the Veche public assembly — a democratic electoral process dating back to early medieval times.

"It is symbolic that this takes place in Novgorod, which we all associate with Veche democracy," he said. "The ability to monitor elections is also Veche democracy."

The ancient practice survived for nearly 300 years until the Republic of Novgorod came under the direct control of Ivan III in 1478.

Putin has ordered cameras to be installed in each of the country's 93,000 polling stations, setting aside 15 billion rubles (\$478 million) for the project. A web site set to be launched on Feb. 1 will allow anyone interested to watch voting at any polling station, Shchyogolev said.

The sum for the project is almost twice as much as the total amount spent by the elections commission on the State Duma elections. The installation of cameras is being carried out by Rostelecom, the country's national telecommunications provider.

The scope of the plan has surprised even the head of the Central Elections Commission, Vladimir Churov, who told reporters early on that he believed that equipping just 10 percent of polling stations would be enough.

But given the limited time before the March 4 presidential election, officials are already saying they will not be able to achieve putting cameras in every polling place.

Novgorod Governor Sergei Mitin told The Moscow Times on Saturday that roughly 16 percent of voting points in the Novgorod region — primarily in far-flung areas — will not have cameras, but it would only affect stations serving about 1,900 people.

Deputy Communications and Press Minister Ilya Massukh told reporters that cameras will also not be installed in about 1,000 polling stations located in prisons, hospitals and military units.

The camera network is built to allow 25 million views per day. Shchyogolev said presidential candidates and the media will all have access to the broadcast, which will also be archived after the election.

Some experts have expressed skepticism about the project, saying the installation of cameras cannot prevent elections commission members from changing results.

But Igor Borisov, a former Central Elections Commission member, told The Moscow Times that the installation of cameras would go a long way in answering the challenges of critics vocal in the blogosphere.

"Cameras could not cover the whole program, but the decision is really a challenge to the Internet community," said Borisov, who heads the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law.

Election officials in Novgorod said personnel responsible for counting votes would also be under the watch of cameras.

"We are now teaching them not to be afraid of cameras," said one official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

A [survey](#) conducted by the FOM polling agency last week found that the majority of Russians are in favor of placing cameras in polling stations. According to the poll released last Thursday, 63 percent of Russians in 43 regions spoke positively about the measure.

But Yelena, a Novgorod resident and a state employee in her 40s, said she had doubts over the transparency of the election — even with the installation of cameras — as officials will continue to pressure government workers to vote as a bloc.

She said that during the Duma election campaign she was told by senior officials to vote for United Russia.

"Today, they are telling us that those cameras will watch over our voting, but I don't believe it. I know that the cameras will not be inside the polling booths," she said.

Another local resident Konstantin, 45, an employee in the utilities sector, was more dismissive.

"They will continue to make violations before people will stop them. The people above are not responding to people below," he said, noting that he plans to vote for Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov for president.

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