

OSCE Says Web Cameras Don't Replace Observers

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January 26, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's promise to equip most of the country's 95,000 polling stations with web cameras for the upcoming presidential vote does not remove the need for election observers, the envoy of Europe's top elections watchdog said Thursday.

The cameras are a "very interesting idea," but they only will record what can be seen with eyes, Heidi Tagliavini, the head of the observer mission of the Organization of Security and Cooperation, or OSCE, [told](#) reporters, Interfax reported.

She said it would be more interesting to see what the cameras don't show — like how the vote count is fixed in writing, how results are transmitted to the next level, how the data is stored and who has access to it.

The opposition has ridiculed the web camera plan as a waste of money. "No cameras will prevent vote-rigging. We're just throwing 14 billion rubles (\$460 million) out the window,"

billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who is running against Putin, said on his Facebook page.

Swiss diplomat Tagliavini, who officially opened the OSCE's long-term observer mission Thursday, raised some eyebrows by saying she only learned about the cameras, announced by Putin in December, the same day. "I first heard of this from [Central Elections Commission chairman Vladimir] Churov this morning," she said.

Run by the OSCE's Warsaw-based Bureau for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the mission will deploy 40 long-term observers throughout the country and another 160 short-term observers for election day on March 4.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe plans to send 30 short-term observers, meaning that overall there will be 230 Western monitors.

The OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly said it won't send observers.

In a letter to State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, assembly president Petros Efthymiou said it monitors presidential elections only in "exceptional circumstances" and limits its work to parliamentary elections "for practical and financial reasons."

We "do not consider the upcoming election exceptional," Efthymiou wrote in the Jan. 24 letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Moscow Times.

An OSCE official said "exceptional circumstances" are a diplomatic paraphrase that implies that the outcome is a foregone conclusion.

"If the winner was unclear, the decision [to send observers] would have been different," the official said upon condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Putin is widely expected to win the election because none of his four competitors match his ratings.

The assembly, which brings together 320 lawmakers from 57 member states of OSCE, sent some 100 observers to last month's Duma elections.

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