

Russia: PACE Critics Wrong

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Charges that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his United Russia party dominate the country's politics are unfair, State Duma officials told Europe's leading parliamentary assembly Thursday.

Critics overlook that the opposition got more votes in [last month's] elections than in 2007, Liberal Democrat deputy Leonid Slutsky said during a debate at the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, or PACE, in Strasbourg, Interfax reported.

Slutsky currently heads the Russian delegation to PACE and was elected one of the assembly's deputy presidents earlier this week.

He argued that the fact that an opposition party member is leading the Russian delegation shows the weakness of critics' arguments. Led by veteran nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the Liberal Democrats have in the past been accused of toeing the Kremlin line.

Svetlana Goryacheva, a deputy for the Just Russia party, which has supported the opposition protests, praised Putin for keeping the country intact.

"Today you criticize Putin, but precisely his policies saved Russia from falling to pieces," she was cited as saying by Interfax.

The assembly held a special debate on "Russia between two elections," which was tabled in the wake of the mass protests following the Dec. 4 vote.

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