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Webcams Ready for Electoral Debut

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When the country elects a new president on Sunday, the world will be watching. But for the first time round, the world will be able to watch it live on the Internet as millions cast their vote from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad.

The ambitious plan to install two web cameras in each of the 100,000 ballot stations spread across the largest country in the world has been carried out successfully, Communications Minister Igor Shchyogolev said Thursday.

"We have more than 90,000 transmission points for 200,000 cameras — never has anything like this been done in the whole world," he said.

The project, which comes with a $478 million price tag, was announced by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in December as a response to the massive protests against suspected vote-rigging in the State Duma elections.

Shchyogolev says the money is well-invested because the "unique infrastructure" would be

expanded for uses like networking between schools — many of which serve as ballot stations — and introducing transmissions of court hearings.

"This is not a system meant for one day," he said.

But the bold plan has failed to impress critics, who point to serious limitations in the project's implementation.

They argue that the flood of footage won't come from the places where most of the alleged violations took place during the Dec. 4 Duma vote — but at the district and regional elections commissions where the ballots are taken after voting.

Yet an upbeat Shchyogolev promised Thursday that the web cameras will provide stable transmission for up to 25 million users on election day.

He said the system's capacity allows for 1.2 million viewers simultaneously and 60,000 simultaneous views per single camera — more than double of what is necessary.

"We expect up to 500,000 users," he said.

The main drawback, critics say, is that Internet users cannot just log on and watch Sunday, but they need to register by Saturday at Webvybory2012.ru.

The site lets you browse a map of the country and zoom into any of the 91,400 ballot stations that have been equipped with cameras. Users must register (they may use existing social network profiles) and bookmark the stations they want to watch. On Sunday, they can only watch those stations they previously bookmarked.

"This means that authorities get a clear picture of the ballot stations that have no online audience — where they can do as they like just as before," said Oleg Kozlovsky, an activist with the Solidarity opposition movement.

Shchyogolev explained that the registration system was introduced in order to avoid Internet traffic overload. He pointed out that Netflix, the U.S. video-streaming portal, had introduced restrictions for users wishing to stream more than one movie at a time for similar reasons.

"This is a purely technical, not a political limitation," he said. He added that some 380,000 users had registered by Thursday.

Another limitation, introduced for legal reasons, stipulates that the transmission is interrupted when the vote count begins. As voting ends at 8 p.m. in each of the country's nine time zones, the webcams go offline and will come back only after voting ends in the westernmost region Kaliningrad at 9 p.m. Moscow time.

This is to prevent voters getting influenced by footage from counting, and officials stress that the cameras continue recording. But Kozlovsky argued that this is another reduction in transparency because the archived recordings will be difficult to get.

Shchyogolev reiterated Thursday that every citizen will be able to order any archived recording by completing an application form at Gosuslugi.ru, a portal for electronic

government services.

But that form was not searchable Thursday, and activists say the site has proven extremely cumbersome in the past. Nikolai Belyayev, a leading member of the League of Voters, a pressure group set up in the wake of the Duma elections, said his attempts to register for various services resulted in up to three-week delays because of glitches and bureaucratic holdups.

"The system to get archival material will be unbelievably complicated," he predicted.

Activists also pointed out that the registration system and other limitations had not been widely reported by national media until now.

"And today it is only three days before the election," Belyayev said.

Lilia Shibanova, the head of the independent elections watchdog, Golos, argued that the webcams would help check dubious voter turnout figures and that archive access was crucial because most professional observers will be working in polling stations Sunday.

"The biggest test will be to watch footage from the North Caucasus," she said by telephone.

Regions like Chechnya and Ingushetia are notorious for reporting turnouts of more than 98 percent and results of 99 percent for Putin and his United Russia party.

Kozlovsky, the Solidarity activist, added that even the best camera footage won't uncover the two most popular fraud methods used at December's elections.

So-called voter carousels, where people vote at multiple polling stations, won't likely be revealed because viewers would have to screen hundreds of voters' faces, he said. And meddling with results further up in the election commissions' hierarchy is hard to detect, "because there are no cameras and access is extremely restricted also for journalists," he said.

However, even critics agree that the web cameras are, in principle, not a bad idea.

"Actually, this a viable solution for monitoring and protecting from vote fraud — if only it was not set up by exactly the same people who orchestrated the last falsifications," said Anton Nosik, a popular blogger and opposition activist.

Training for election observers at Moscow's Polytechnic Museum set for Saturday was suddenly canceled Thursday, said Nikolai Lyaskin, of the School of Observers pressure group.

The museum initially said there was no space for the training, before admitting that the cancellation was because of an unexpected visit of Putin to the museum Saturday, Lyaskin said.

Staff writer Kevin O'Flynn contributed to this report.

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