

Western Observers Call Vote Flawed

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Opposition leaders Vladimir Ryzhkov, left, and Sergei Udaltsov standing on a stage before several thousand people on Pushkin Square on Monday. **Igor Tabakov**

International observers criticized Sunday's presidential election as seriously flawed Monday but avoided statements about the vote's legitimacy.

"Conditions for the campaign were clearly skewed in favor of one candidate," Dutch lawmaker Tiny Kox told reporters, adding that national media coverage had given a clear advantage to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

The Central Elections Commission rejected the criticism.

"That's an inadequate evaluation of the situation," commission member Tatyana Voronova told Interfax.

Earlier, commission chairman Vladimir Churov said no other country had fairer elections than Russia, and he suggested that foreign observers were increasingly spying.

Putin won the election by a wide margin over four competitors, securing 63.6 percent of the vote, according to latest data from the Central Elections Commission.

The second-place finisher was Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who got 17.9 percent.

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov came in third with 7.8 percent, while Liberal Democrat leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy got 6.2 percent. Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov finished last with 3.85 percent.

The observers, led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said they noted procedural irregularities, including cases of group, proxy and multiple voting, according to an official report [published](#) on the organization's website.

Former Croatian Foreign Minister Tonino Picula, who headed the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly delegation, said the election was problematic from the start.

"The point of elections is that their outcome should be uncertain. This was not the case in Russia," Picula said. "There was no real competition, and abuse of government resources ensured that the ultimate winner of the election was never in doubt."

The observers also criticized the vote count, saying it had been bad or very bad in a third of 98 observed counts and that ballot-stuffing had occurred.

"Crucial figures related to the count could not always be established with confidence in their accuracy," the report stated.

Andrea Rigoni, an Italian lawmaker who was a member of the Council of Europe's observer mission, said he failed to observe the vote count in a Moscow ballot station because the local elections commission took five hours to check signatures and ballots.

"After 1 a.m. I asked to leave because I had to hand in my observer report," Rigoni told The Moscow Times in an interview.

But pressed by reporters, OSCE mission chief Heidi Tagliavini refused to label the election as not free or unfair.

"Free and fair is a political statement," she said at a joint news conference of OSCE and Council of Europe observers.

The Swiss diplomat added that she deliberately chose not to make any statements about the election's democratic standards.

Kox, who headed the delegation of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, explained that the observers were obliged to remain impartial.

"We are not here to take sides," he said.

The Dutchman also rebutted Churov's allegations that the foreigners were masquerading as observers to get access to military secrets.

He said the observers had come by invitation because Russia is a member of both the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

"We are no aliens," Kox said.

Churov said earlier that day that international observers were turning to gathering political and military information.

"There is an irresistible wish to enter closed nuclear centers, rocket centers and so on," he told reporters, Interfax reported.

Churov, who has consistently denied accusations of overseeing widespread election fraud and resisted calls to resign, argued that webcams and transparent ballot boxes made Russia's process fairer than the voting anywhere else in the world. He even offered help to the United States.

"We are working on observation systems for the elections in America," Churov told Itar-Tass, adding that this would ensure the legitimacy of this November's U.S. presidential election.

Speaking on NTV on Thursday, he said Western countries that do not introduce these measures "will face lingering doubts about their elections."

After massive fraud allegations following the State Duma elections in December, the government installed some 200,000 webcams in the country's more than 90,000 polling stations.

Tagliavini said that was a positive step but not sufficient to dispel widespread mistrust in the election's conduct.

The OSCE and the Council of Europe sent 262 observers, including 40 long-term monitors deployed in the regions.

The organizations wanted to send significantly more staff. The OSCE alone originally demanded more than 500, but the elections commission and the Foreign Ministry refused to allow more.

The observers' findings were shared by the European Union, whose foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said in a [statement](#) that Russia should address the shortcomings in the election.

Many Western leaders refrained from congratulating Putin on his victory Monday.

Ashton said only that "the EU takes note of the preliminary results of the presidential elections and the clear victory of Vladimir Putin."

The only exception was German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who congratulated Putin by telephone, spokesman Steffen Seibert told The Moscow Times via Twitter.

The U.S. State Department issued a statement late Monday that "congratulates the Russian people on the completion" of the presidential election.

The statement adds that Washington looks forward to working with the president-elect after the results are certified and he is sworn in. It does not mention Putin by name, though.

Also included in the statement is a call for Russia to look into the fraud allegations.

"We urge the Russian government to conduct an independent, credible investigation of all reported electoral violations," the statement said.

By Monday evening, only leaders of former Soviet states and a handful of Asian countries, including Japan and China, had offered their congratulations to Putin himself, [according](#) to the government website.

The Russian blogosphere was full of comments from people who scoffed at the tears on Putin's cheek as he declared victory to thousands of supporters on Manezh Square.

A frequent American critic of Putin also joined in the ribbing.

"Dear Vlad, Surprise! Surprise! You won. The Russian people are crying too!" Republican Senator John McCain [tweeted](#).

Putin dismissed speculation that he cried, blaming the weather instead.

They were "real [tears] because of the wind," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Guy Verhofstadt, a former Belgian prime minister and member of the European Parliament, called Putin's win "the nail in the coffin of Russian democracy."

"The sad truth is that the Kremlin continues to deny Russian citizens the constitutionally guaranteed right for free and fair elections," Verhofstadt [said](#) in a statement on his liberal political group's website.

Churov proclaimed Putin's victory Monday even before 100 percent of the votes had been counted.

Moscow was the only region where Putin got less than 50 percent. He garnered 46.9 percent of the vote in the capital.

Prokhorov, who is not an experienced politician and had never run a campaign before, received considerable support in large cities.

In Moscow, the heart of opposition protests, he got 20.4 percent. Other areas of strong support were St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg.

Prokhorov picked up about 15.4 percent of the St. Petersburg vote, and he polled at 18.7 percent in Yekaterinburg, the Urals city that has staged pro-Putin rallies for workers in the region.

As was the case in past elections, the North Caucasus proved to be Putin's biggest stronghold. But local results topping 90 percent fueled doubts about the vote's fairness.

Chechnya reported results of 99.7 percent for Putin and also the highest turnout at 99.6

percent. Neighboring Dagestan gave Putin 92.8 percent, Ingushetia and Karachayevo-Cherkessia both 91.3 percent.

The only other region with similarly high results was the southern Siberian Tyva republic, where Putin got 90 percent.

Opposition activists maintain that results would be significantly different without falsification.

Golos, the independent watchdog, said Putin got at least 50.7 percent, more than 14 points less than the official result, but still enough for a first-round win.

However, the group Citizen Observer said Putin should not have won in the first round.

Golos complained of violence against two of its observers in Zheleznodorozhny, east of Moscow.

While on their way to file a complaint on violations they had witnessed, observers Yelizaveta Klepikova and Denis Sukhov were stopped by a group of men, who repeatedly beat them and stole their cameras.

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