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Election Officials Refuse to Overturn Astrakhan Vote

By Alexandra Odynova

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Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, above, said he was going to fly to Astrakhan to support Oleg Shein in his hunger strike. **Igor Tabakov**

The Central Elections Commission and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that they see no reason to annul the results of a disputed mayoral election in Astrakhan.

The political opposition has rallied behind defeated candidate Oleg Shein, whose long-running hunger strike in protest is drawing lots of attention.

When asked about the situation in Astrakhan during his annual address to the State Duma on Wednesday, Putin said neither he nor President Dmitry Medvedev has a right to cancel the mayoral vote.

"He [Shein] started the hunger strike but didn't turn to the court," Putin told lawmakers. His remarks prompted deputies from A Just Russia, Shein's party, to stand up and walk out.

Sergei Mironov, leader of A Just Russia, said the party finally has video footage from the webcams at all 203 stations in Astrakhan and can go to court now.

The images are key evidence in lawsuits protesting the results, and opposition leaders believe the footage will substantiate their claims of vote fraud.

Shein has been on a hunger strike since March 16. He refuses to accept the official results, which show that he received 30 percent of the vote, compared with 60 percent for the United Russia-backed winner.

"Most of Shein's claims of violations do not match the facts," Leonid Ivlev, deputy head of the Central Elections Commission, said at a meeting to discuss the mayoral election. "There are no grounds for the Central Elections Commission to cancel the results of the election," he said, Interfax reported.

Shein and 20 supporters stopped eating three weeks ago to draw attention to what they call a fraudulent election.

Their protest has galvanized the opposition, which has organized mass protests over purported fraud in the State Duma elections in December and the presidential vote last month.

The hunger strike moved protest activity from Moscow to Astrakhan this week.

The struggle was heightened Tuesday when anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny, a prominent leader of Moscow opposition rallies, went to Astrakhan accompanied by hundreds of supporters, who set up tents in the city's downtown.

The League of Voters, an independent organization created by prominent figures to advocate for voters' rights, announced Wednesday that it has set aside 300,000 rubles ($10,000) to buy tickets to Astrakhan for people who want to support Shein.

A Just Russia tried to include the Astrakhan issue on the Duma's Wednesday agenda, but the initiative failed to win the support of the majority.

"This spring, we have a hit new reality show, 'Hunger Games,'" United Russia State Duma Deputy Alexander Sidyakin said in a statement published on the party's website. "It's not a good way to reach your goal."

The Astrakhan region's governor, Alexander Zhilkin, told reporters Wednesday that he is ready to offer Shein a job in his administration, Interfax reported. He didn't elaborate, however.

Opposition activist Ilya Yashin was detained in Astrakhan on Wednesday shortly after his arrival. Police justified his arrest by saying he participated in a brawl with a pro-Kremlin activist.

More opposition figures are planning to go to Astrakhan, including socialite and TV host Ksenia Sobchak and author Dmitry Bykov.

Mironov also said he is going there to support the strikers.

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