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Shein Slams Foot-Dragging in Astrakhan Election Case

By Jonathan Earle

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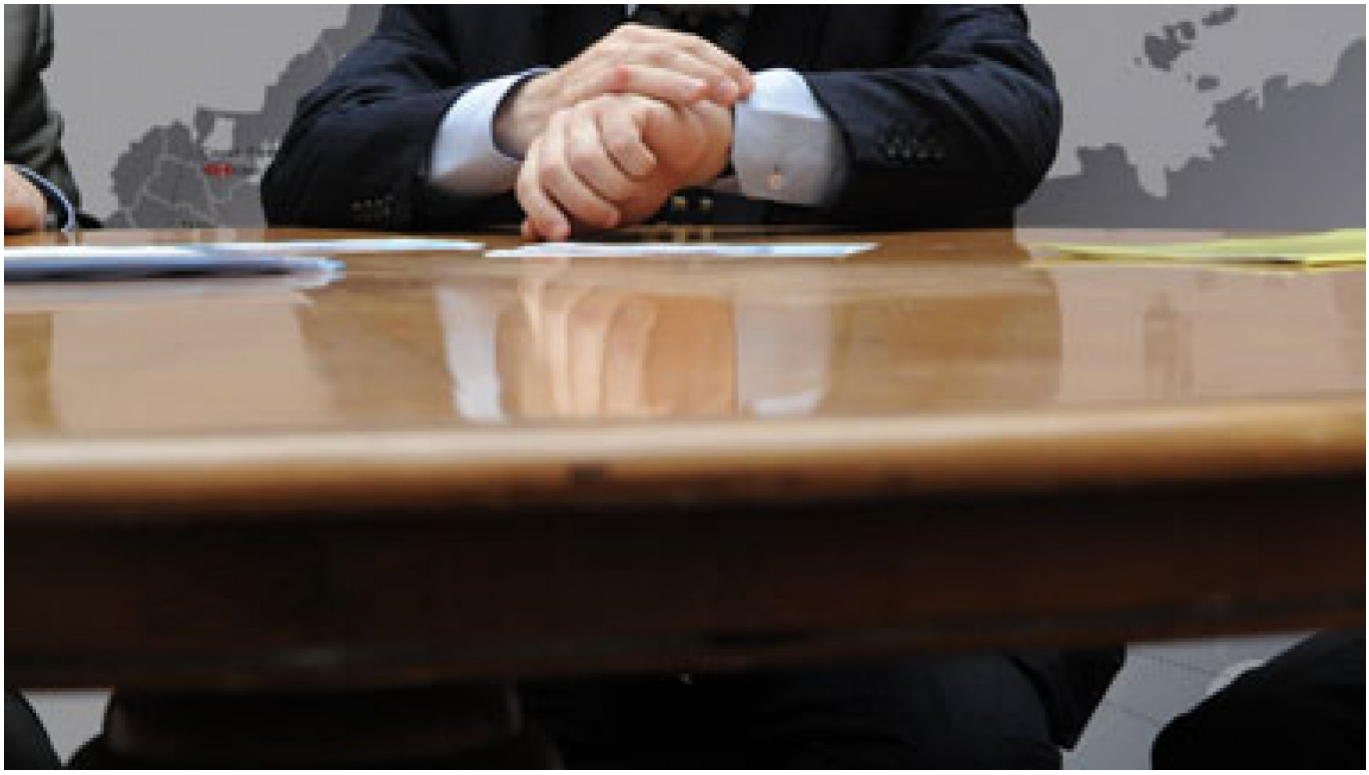

Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov **Sergei Porter**

Astrakhan's ex-mayoral candidate Oleg Shein accused authorities on Tuesday of dragging their feet in resolving a disputed election in the southern city and said he would continue his month-long hunger strike.

After a marathon meeting in Moscow with Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov, Shein said he was confident that Russian courts would invalidate the election but did not rule out an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

Shein, a State Duma deputy from the A Just Russia party, lost the March 4 vote to United Russia's incumbent candidate, Mikhail Stolyarov, by more than 30 percentage points, according to official results.

Shein said the vote was fraudulent, and his campaign to secure a new election has become a

rallying point for the nation's nascent opposition as well as a test of the ruling party's grip on power in the regions.

Looking gaunt but otherwise healthy on the 33rd day of his hunger strike, Shein told reporters that he had reviewed footage from 42 polling stations with Churov and Just Russia chief Sergei Mironov until 6 a.m. Tuesday morning.

Shein said the footage showed elections officials committing numerous violations.

Officials at about 20 stations failed to display the ballots properly; police at one station covered a stack of ballots with a billy club to stop a re-count; at another, officials leafed through ballots without looking at the results, he said.

“We're not talking about exit polls or ballot stuffing at this point,” he said.

Churov, an opposition punching bag since he presided over disputed State Duma elections in December, has yet to comment publicly on the videos, which Shein said will soon be posted online.

A group of lawyers from United Russia, A Just Russia and the Central Elections Commission will continue to examine the footage, and Churov will release an official report, Shein said.

Officials from the commission have said the recorded violations are not enough to justify a re-vote.

Shein filed a lawsuit in Astrakhan challenging the election results before flying to Moscow.

On Tuesday, he criticized the court's apparent lack of haste, citing its decision to meet with him later this week.

“The meeting is a formality and takes about 10 minutes. Why are we having this meeting on Friday? Why aren't we having it today?” he said.

The election results can be overturned if a court voids the results from at least 25 percent of the polling stations.

Shein said he was confident that the court would decide in his favor, but he didn't rule out taking the case to Strasbourg, although he was “lukewarm” about that prospect, given that the European court often takes years to resolve cases.

Shein said he was ready to end his hunger strike if the elections committee publicly corroborates the violations, or if a court voids the election results.

High-profile opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny have appeared at pro-Shein rallies in Astrakhan, as has Just Russia leader Mironov, who said Tuesday that he was cautiously optimistic about Shein's chances in court.

He also urged Shein to call off his hunger strike.

“We don't need a sacrificial lamb,” Mironov said, Interfax reported.

A pro-Shein demonstration in Astrakhan on Saturday drew thousands, Shein said, adding that rallies would be held every Saturday for the foreseeable future.

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