

Elections Chief Admits Astrakhan Violations

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Churov holding a news conference Friday in front of a screen showing video footage from Astrakhan's election. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Elections chief Vladimir Churov raised opposition hopes of overturning Astrakhan's mayoral election by announcing widespread procedural violations, a claim made by candidate Oleg Shein and his supporters.

Video footage revealed procedural violations at 128 of the city's 202 polling stations during the March 4 vote, although there was no evidence of falsification, Churov told journalists Friday.

The announcement was greeted with jubilation by Shein, whose refusal to concede the election to the ruling party candidate and a dramatic hunger strike have turned him into an opposition hero.

"Our chances of success in court have been significantly improved," he wrote on his [blog](#). "Now I'm confident that the court will annul the election in Astrakhan."

Shein says he defeated United Russia's Mikhail Stolyarov in districts with electronic counting machines as well as in exit polls, sparking allegations that the vote was rigged. Officially, Shein lost the election to Stolyarov by more than 30 percentage points.

Elections can be annulled due to procedural violations even without evidence of outright falsification, said Grigory Melkonyants of the Golos elections watchdog, [Gazeta.ru reported](#). He warned, however, that the legal process can take months.

Churov, who said violations should be handled by the court system, also announced steps to boost voter confidence by reducing procedural violations.

The vote-counting procedure will be simplified, with electronic counting machines becoming standard by 2015, and tests for poll workers will be introduced, the chief of the Central Elections Commission said.

Also, his deputy, Leonid Ivlev, will lead a new initiative to monitor and train local poll workers.

"These are municipal elections, paid for by municipal governments and conducted by municipal officials, but now we think it makes sense to tighten control over them," Churov said, RIA-Novosti reported.

The measures drew a lukewarm response from Lilia Shibanova, also of Golos, who told The Moscow Times that electronic counting machines were only as honest as the software they run on, and that vote-counting rules were already simple enough.

"Poll workers don't break the rules because they're complex; they break them because the rules get in the way of vote-rigging," she said.

She criticized the idea of Ivlev monitoring local elections. "Ivlev traveled to Astrakhan — where there were outrageous falsifications, and people were getting beaten up — and said everything was 'super.' I'd prefer that experts like him stayed at home," she said.

Churov said he has asked Communications and Press Minister Igor Shchyogolev to ensure that web cameras are in place for upcoming mayoral elections in Omsk on June 10 and Krasnoyarsk on June 17.

Both Shein and Churov have praised the web cameras, which were installed at polling stations nationwide after allegations of vote-rigging tarnished December's State Duma elections, which saw the ruling United Russia party suffer heavy losses.

Shein has attracted international attention in recent weeks, with opposition leaders, including Alexei Navalny, throwing their support behind the Just Russia member and former Duma deputy.

Much of the buzz has surrounded Shein's hunger strike, now in its second month.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov, who attended a rally calling for a new mayoral election in Astrakhan on Saturday, has asked Shein and his supporters to call off the hunger strike.

Churov drew an even sharper tone on Friday. "I asked him from the very beginning to stop this useless and pointless hunger strike," he said. "These kinds of stunts are purely political. They have nothing to do with the election."

A first hearing in Shein's court case to overturn the mayoral vote is scheduled for April 26.

At least 200 people rallied for a new Astrakhan vote on Saturday, and five were detained for various offenses, including public drunkenness, police told Interfax.

The rally follows a similar gathering of at least 3,000 people that was observed by a Moscow Times reporter the previous Saturday. Police, who often downplay the size of opposition rallies, estimated that 350 people attended that event.

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