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Shein Loses Astrakhan Election Challenge

By Jonathan Earle

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Shein, right, drinking a cup of juice on April 12 while on hunger strike, in a goodwill gesture to the elections commission. **Dmitry Gudkov**

Former Astrakhan mayoral candidate Oleg Shein, who has waged a noisy public campaign to overturn the results of the March 4 election he said he lost because of fraud, has pledged to appeal a judge's decision to throw out his case.

"In a month and a half, we'll be eligible to file a petition with the European Court of Human Rights. Until then, it's essential that we pass through one more level of jurisdiction — the regional court," he wrote on his LiveJournal blog Friday.

Shein claims that the results of the election, which official results had United Russia's Mikhail Stolyarov winning by 30 percentage points, should be annulled because of widespread procedural violations.

But Judge Olga Morozova ruled Friday that there were no grounds for a revote.

"Morozova has decided that you can determine the people's will without looking at their ballots. In other words, the court has canceled elections in general," Shein wrote, adding that an explanation from the court was expected this week.

Shein, a veteran Duma deputy from the A Just Russia party, said video footage from polling stations revealed numerous violations.

Since then, he has spearheaded an unusually strong public campaign to overturn the vote, drawing thousands into the streets and grabbing endorsements from major opposition leaders, including anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny and TV host Ksenia Sobchak.

Shein made national headlines by staging a 40-day hunger strike, all the while maintaining a grueling schedule of public appearances.

He told Slon.ru on Friday that he would not go back on hunger strike to protest the court's decision.

Although most observers said that Shein's chances of overturning the election were slim, hopes were raised when Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov confirmed violations at 128 of the city's 202 polling stations.

Pavel Salin, an analyst with the Center for Current Politics, linked the court's decision to the government's new hard-line policy on the opposition, which has included a law dramatically raising fines on illegal demonstrations and searches of opposition leaders' apartments.

"The decision was completely expected," he said. "The authorities decided in March not to give the opposition any more concessions, therefore his chances of overturning the election are now zero."

But Salin said even an appeal to the European Court was a losing proposition.

"By the time the European Court makes a decision, Russians will have forgotten about this case," he said.

A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov wrote on Ekho Mosvky's website that Shein was in danger of becoming the first person charged under the new demonstration law after he was detained with three supporters Tuesday for allegedly participating in an unsanctioned rally.

The Astrakhan regional Duma on Friday passed a law establishing the procedure for gubernatorial elections. The law gives local governments and registered political parties the right to nominate candidates and calls for a runoff if no candidate receives 50 percent or more of the vote.

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