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Duma Lawmaker Slams U.S. Vote as 'Unfair'

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Central Elections Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov pointed to violations and archaisms in U.S. election law in an article recently published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta. **Andrei Makhonin**

A prominent State Duma lawmaker who observed the United States presidential election lambasted the vote as "systemically unfair" and riddled with organizational shortcomings.

Ilya Kostunov, a deputy for the governing United Russia party, told The Moscow Times on Thursday that large-scale voter disenfranchisement and lax identification procedures rendered the American system more prone to violations than the Russian one.

"In Russia there are institutions that protect from voting fraud; in the U.S. there are no such institutions," Kostunov said in a telephone interview. As examples he pointed to Russia's strict voter identification rules and the installation of web cameras in all of the country's more than 90,000 ballot stations for the presidential election in March.

He also said an individual vote is more important in Russia because the voting system is direct. The U.S. president is elected indirectly by the 538 members of the electoral college.

Kostunov, a former Nashi commissar who made headlines in past months with bills that would label foreign-funded media outlets "foreign agents," was speaking after returning from Annapolis, Maryland. He and three other Duma members were sent to the U.S. as short-term election observers for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

He said that while he did not see voting fraud with his own eyes, soft voter identification rules meant that double voting was a possibility. He also noted that the use of voting machines jeopardized confidentiality. "I saw polling station workers telling voters how to vote, and everybody could see for whom they voted," he said.

The OSCE, a security watchdog that comprises 57 European and Central Asian states plus the U.S. and Canada, sent 44 long-term observers and an over-100-person short-term mission of parliamentarians to monitor the U.S. vote.

In separate reports Wednesday and Thursday, both missions expressed concern over voter registry accuracy and criticized the fact that some 4.1 million Americans were ineligible to vote because they lived outside the 50 states and that another almost 6 million U.S. citizens could not vote due to a criminal conviction.

Kostunov called these numbers "very serious" indicators that the U.S. system does not support fair elections.

The OSCE regularly sends observer missions to Russia and has questioned the fairness of the presidential vote and the December Duma elections. Kostunov said the organization's reports about his country were overly politicized and emotionally charged.

The deputy's words echoed earlier accusations from Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov, who last month called the U.S. electoral system flawed and undemocratic. Churov took the brunt of allegations of massive vote fraud, which triggered unprecedented anti-government protests in the past year.

Kostunov acknowledged that there was a lack of voter confidence in Russia. "Yes, there is a crisis of trust," he said, "however, not in the electoral system but more broadly in the political system."

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