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Why Russia Got It Wrong on U.S. Elections

By Michael Bohm

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The U.S. presidential election on Nov. 6 was "systematically unfair," according to Russia's top elections official, Vladimir Churov, and several State Duma deputies who monitored the vote.

The Central Elections Commission's official report on the election says U.S. authorities don't provide "even the minimal set of proclaimed democratic values" and "don't meet international standards." What's more, Churov said the organization of U.S. elections is "one of the worst in the world."

With this assessment, Russia is showing that it places a priority on populistic rhetoric over facts when it comes to elections and other forms of democracy. After all, this is the same country whose election observers endorsed the Oct. 7 presidential vote that handed Venezuela's Hugo Chavez a fourth term and Belarus' 2010 vote that gave Alexander Lukashenko a fourth term.

But Churov's top complaint about the U.S. election is that voters didn't vote directly for Barack

Obama or Mitt Romney but for members of the Electoral College who will later make the choice for them. Unfortunately, Churov is about 200 years behind on U.S. history. If he even took a cursory glance at a sample ballot, he would have seen that Obama and Romney were the main choices on the ballot. Depending on the state, there was also a host of independent and small-party candidates to choose from. Needless to say, there were no Electoral College members on the ballot.

Churov should know that college electors meet in mid-December as part of a constitutional formality after the president is elected by the people, and they almost always vote in accordance with the popular vote. Electors who vote against the popular vote face heavy fines in many states. Since 1789, only 85 incidents have occurred when electors voted against the popular vote, and there has never been a case when these "faithless electors" changed the final outcome, including the 2000 race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

Ilya Kostunov, a United Russia deputy best known as the co-author of the recent law forcing some foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations to label themselves "foreign agents," went to the U.S. to observe the election and fully supports Churov's criticism. "In Russia, there are institutions that protect against voter fraud; in the U.S., there are no such institutions," he told Moscow Times reporter Nikolaus von Twickel last week. Kostunov pointed to "strict voter identification rules" and the 90,000 web cameras installed in Russia's ballot stations as examples of Russia's pre-eminent electoral system.

But Kostunov failed to mention that the web cameras were only installed ahead of Russia's presidential election this year on orders from Vladimir Putin, who was hoping that the PR ploy would somehow help end mass protests over fraud-tainted Duma elections in December — the very elections that handed Kostunov a first term in the Duma.

But before Kostunov speaks too quickly about there being "no U.S. institutions to protect against voter fraud," perhaps he should remember, for example, the ACORN voter fraud scandal in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Eighteen members of ACORN, an advocacy group for low-income and minority voters, were convicted of paying voters, submitting falsified voter registration forms and other forms of election fraud. Punishment for the 18 members ranged from criminal fines of $10,000 to a 10-month prison sentence.

But in Russia, the authorities disingenuously tell citizens to take their voter-fraud complaints to court, where judges almost always dismiss the lawsuits with only a superficial review for "lack of evidence."

In contrast to Churov and Kostunov's complaints, Joao Sares, leader of the international observer mission for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, summed up the 2012 U.S. vote as "free and fair" and "another demonstration of the country's commitment to democracy." His main criticisms were limited to long lines at U.S. polling stations and campaign finance laws that allow for unlimited spending.

Interestingly, the OSCE also monitored Russian elections and had harsh words for the December Duma vote — "undue interference of state authorities" — and for the March presidential election, noting widespread irregularities at polling stations.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry has chimed in, releasing a report on U.S. human rights

violations in late October that harshly criticizes the country's electoral system. It says small states like Delaware and North Dakota have more electoral votes (three) than their small populations would receive in a strictly proportional system (one), giving these small states an unfair boost. In addition, the ministry says some U.S. states require voters to show driver's licenses as the primary form of identification, presumably discriminating against poorer voters who don't own cars. The report also criticizes the U.S. practice when governors appoint acting senators on a temporary basis when an incumbent leaves, or dies, before his or her term expires. (Note that in Russia, senators are appointed from the very start of their terms, and the direct election of governors only returned last month — and even then, the Kremlin controls the results through "filters.")

To be fair, there are a few legitimate criticisms from Churov and other officials, such as the U.S. practice of denying more than 5 million convicts and those on parole the right to vote. Maybe this is what Churov really had in mind when he said the U.S. electoral system is "one of the worst in the world."

Perhaps, however, if Churov took a more objective and honest look at Russia's own electoral system, he would change his opinion.

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