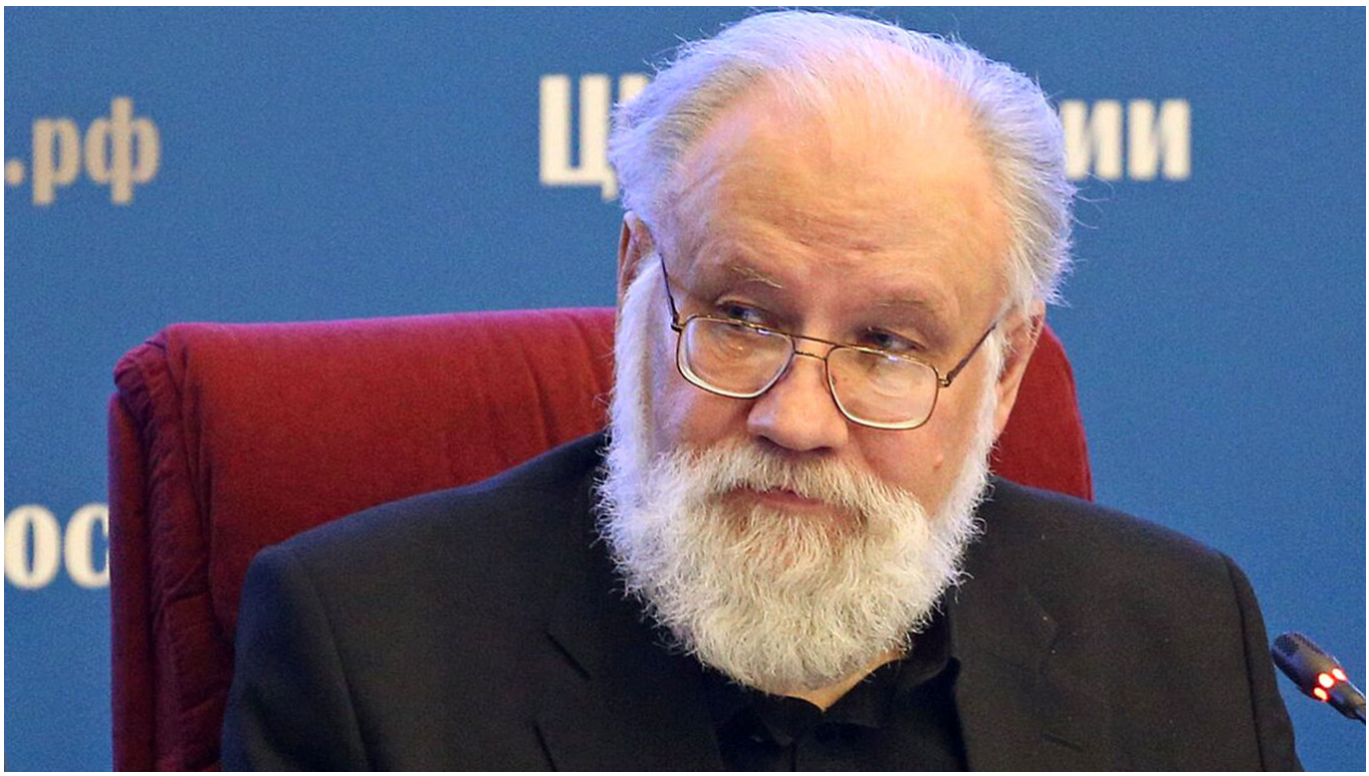
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Russia's Former Election Chief Vladimir Churov Dies Aged 70

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Former Chairman of the Russian Central Election Commission Vladimir Churov. **Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency**

Russia's former election chief Vladimir Churov, who was ultimately removed from his post after overseeing massive electoral fraud that led to some of Russia's biggest pro-democracy protests, has died at age 70, state media reported Wednesday.

Churov suffered a "massive stroke" last week and died in hospital on Wednesday morning after undergoing surgery, the state-run news agency TASS reported, citing the lawmaker Leonid Ivlev.

From 2007-2016, Churov served as chairman of Russia's Central Election Commission, which oversees the organization of elections in the country. During his decade in the job, Churov became emblematic of the failure of Russia's democratic institutions to check creeping authoritarianism.

Churov began his career in the 1990s in the St. Petersburg city administration where he

worked under Vladimir Putin as deputy head of St. Petersburg mayor's external relations committee.

Upon his appointment to head of the election committee in March 2007, the white-bearded, short-sighted Churov proclaimed that "Churov's first law" was that "Putin is always right."

Related article: Chairman Churov Removed From Russian Central Election Commission

In 2011, he oversaw massive vote rigging in national parliamentary elections, earning the ironic nickname "the magician" for his achievements.

Churov waved away all criticism and suggestions of electoral fraud, insisting that video footage of ballot stuffing had been filmed in specially built replica polling booths to discredit the vote. But public outrage ultimately spilled into nationwide street protests, the largest ever seen during Putin's years in power.

Putin replaced Churov as head of the electoral commission in 2016, appointing the widely respected rights advocate Ella Pamfilova as the new and friendlier public face of Russia's elections.

But critics saw Pamfilova's appointment simply as a shift in strategy — from the systematic ballot-stuffing associated with Churov to a new tactic of disqualifying candidates before they could even make it onto the ballot.

Churov's death came less than a week after his 70th birthday on March 17.

Ivlev, who served as deputy chairman of the election commission in 2008-16, told TASS that Churov's death came as a surprise and that he had been planning to write a book on U.S. election meddling.

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