

Work Begins at Anti-Vote Fraud Measures

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Authorities began installing webcams at ballot stations and purchasing see-through ballot boxes Wednesday, following vows by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and elections chief Vladimir Churov to fight fraud in the upcoming presidential vote.

The first cameras were being set up in the Tula region south of Moscow, Interfax reported, citing a regional government official. Each of the region's more than 1,100 polling stations will be equipped with two cameras and a computer that will broadcast live footage online, the report said.

The cameras will cover the ballot box and the election commission's desk where the vote count takes place, the unidentified official was quoted as saying.

In response to the mass protests against alleged vote-rigging at the Dec. 4 State Duma elections, Putin promised during a call-in show two weeks later to equip all of the country's

more than 95,000 polling stations with live cameras.

The announcement was quickly ridiculed by opposition members who argued that setting up so many cameras was a waste of money that could not stop fraud and would bring down the Internet because of information overload.

But Deputy Communications Minister Ilya Massukh dismissed such fears Wednesday, saying the 200,000 cameras would just add 15 percent to 20 percent to web traffic.

"People might feel that the Internet slows down," he told RIA-Novosti.

But Massukh admitted that the plan, which he said carries a 12 billion ruble (\$377 million) price tag, is huge.

"The task is doable, but with difficulty — it is not trivial," he was quoted as saying.

Cameras will have to be bought without official government tenders — bypassing the law — because there is not enough time left before election day on March 4, RIA-Novosti reported.

Yevgeny Yeryomchenko, an IT expert at Neogeography.ru, said that while it remains to be seen if the Internet will cope with the extra web traffic, the project might simply fail because of a lack of manpower to process the information.

"It is very likely that users will be overwhelmed by the amount of information," he said by telephone.

The St. Petersburg Elections Commission said Wednesday that the city is buying translucent ballot boxes for the presidential vote. Boxes appearing "like glass" will be used in all polling stations except in those 10 percent that will have polling machines, commission member Dmitry Krasnyansky told Interfax.

Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov said last week that see-through boxes would be introduced in a third of the country's polling stations to prevent ballot box-stuffing, a widespread fraud method.

International election observers led by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, criticized last month's Duma vote as neither free nor fair. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is expected to publish its final report about the elections on Thursday.

The Warsaw-based elections watchdog sent 200 observers to the Duma elections. It will send the same number of observers to monitor the March presidential vote, OSCE spokesman Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer said by e-mail Wednesday.

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