

New Group to Train Election Observers

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The liberal opposition Yabloko party and the Moscow Helsinki Group are creating a public organization to finance the training of monitors for the March 4 presidential vote and other elections.

Yabloko party leader Sergei Mitrokhin said the group, Transparent Elections, would only accept donations from Russian nationals to avoid accusations of being financed from abroad — a charge that pro-Kremlin youth groups used to discredit Russia's only independent elections watchdog, Golos, ahead of the State Duma vote in December.

"The resources of one party are not enough to make the process systematic," Mitrokhin said at a news conference. "By joining our efforts, we will be able to guarantee fair elections."

Mitrokhin said enough volunteers would be trained to visit all the country's 97,000 polling stations on March 4, arguing that more than 100,000 people attended nationwide rallies on Dec. 10 and 24 against alleged fraud in the Duma vote.

"We will create a mechanism to control elections, and they will stop telling us that we only have data from just 10 percent of the polling stations and that this is not representational," said Grigory Yavlinsky, Yabloko's founder and a presidential hopeful.

But Lyudmila Alexeyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group and a veteran human rights campaigner, expressed doubt about whether enough monitors could be found, saying not all of those who attended last month's rallies would be able to monitor the presidential vote due to age and health issues.

He said the foundation's supervisory council would make sure that the money was spent in a transparent manner.

The supervisory council will include Alexeyeva; Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the opposition-minded Novaya Gazeta newspaper; and a representative of human rights group Memorial.

Notably, Monday's news conference was covered by about 40 reporters and 14 cameras, including the three national state television channels, which in recent years have rarely mentioned the nonparliamentary opposition in their broadcasts. State television broke its silence about anti-Kremlin protests with last month's rallies, which attracted tens of thousands of people in Moscow and hundreds more in the regions.

Transparent Elections is not the first organization to be formed as a result of the protests against the vote, which saw the ruling United Russia party declared the winner with a reduced majority in the Duma. Other new public movements include White Ribbon and Civil Monitor.

"I hope that the foundation will be successful because there is a powerful and enthusiastic movement from below," Alexeyeva said.

She added that the training of election monitors required "large-scale organizational work," which the foundation would supply.

But after two rallies, federal authorities announced a planned liberalization of the country's political life, including amendments to election laws and a return of direct gubernatorial elections. (Related story, front page)

The Dec. 24 rally on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova in Moscow, which attracted up to 120,000 people, was financed by more than 4 million rubles (\$125 million) in donations from about 400,000 people. The money was used to advertise the rally, put up a stage and sound equipment, and treat attendees to free hot tea and cookies.

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