

Lack of 'Political Will' Is Blamed for Election Mess

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Russia is technically capable of organizing fair elections but so far lacked the political will, European lawmakers said Monday.

Last month's State Duma elections were "marked by a convergence of the state and the governing party, limited political competition and a lack of fairness," according to the final report of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, or PACE.

To have free elections, the country needs "decisive political will ... to improve the electoral process, in structure and culture," said the report, published on the assembly's [website](#).

The report said the mass rallies against vote-rigging that followed the Dec. 4 vote showed "the deep concern of the public about the State Duma elections." It argues that while measures have been taken to make elections more transparent and trustworthy, what is really needed is a reform to make the Central Elections Commission impartial.

"Any election needs an impartial referee and, to this day, this is clearly missing in the Russian Federation. Structural change is needed ... to promote citizens' trust in the election results."

The document mentions shortcomings like unfair media access, limitations on foreign observers, refusal to register opposition parties and "frequent procedural violations and manipulations, including ballot box-stuffing" on election day.

However, like a previous report issued by the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, or OSCE, the PACE report refrains from saying the elections failed to meet democratic standards nor does it question their legitimacy.

The assembly, which brings together lawmakers from 47 countries, sent 34 people to observe the Dec. 4 vote.

Moscow's delegation to PACE, which is in Strasbourg for the assembly's winter session this week, reacted positively to the report, which was delivered by Dutch lawmaker Tiny Kox, who headed the observer mission.

"He does not touch on the legitimacy of the Duma elections. He makes constructive criticism of violations that must be addressed," delegation head Leonid Slutsky said about Kox, Itar-Tass reported.

"That's the current debate between Strasbourg and Moscow," said Slutsky, a Duma deputy for the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party.

PACE on Monday also voted against holding an urgent debate on the Russian elections, which might have heightened tensions with lawmakers from countries eager to show democratic deficiencies in Russia.✘

The proposal received 94 votes in favor and 94 against, thus missing the required two-thirds majority, PACE said in an e-mailed statement.

✘Instead, PACE will hold a Russian "current affairs" debate on Thursday, which, unlike an urgent debate does not require lawmakers to adopt a motion.

The assembly also elected French lawmaker Jean-Claude Mignon as its president. Mignon replaces Mevlut Cavusoglu from Turkey.

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