

Duma Backs Off on Vow for Churov's Ouster

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Churov in the State Duma on Friday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

State Duma deputies grilled top elections official Vladimir Churov on last month's disputed parliamentary vote during a heated session Friday, but no new information emerged about vote-rigging allegations and the deputies backtracked on a vow to seek Churov's ouster.

Churov's presence in the Duma had been demanded by the Communists, Liberal Democratic Party and A Just Russia, which hoped to discuss violations in the Dec. 4 elections won by United Russia.

The leaders of the three factions did accuse United Russia and Churov of falsification. But they didn't demand his ouster as threatened earlier.

Sergei Obukhov, a senior Communist lawmaker, explained that his party had decided instead to start collecting signatures among the lawmakers in support of Churov's dismissal.

"We have simply chosen another way," Obukhov said by telephone.

United Russia remained silent during Friday's debate on election fraud, and its leader in the Duma, Andrei Vorobyov, [suggested](#) that the members of the other parties give up their seats. They ignored his suggestion, although earlier they had said they were ready to do so for the sake of a rerun of the elections.

For his part, Churov, chairman of the Central Elections Commission, reproached the parliamentary parties for sending only 269,000 monitors for the elections instead of the 1 million that they had promised.

Churov also called the removal of monitors from polling stations a problem that needed to be investigated. He said hundreds were removed from the country's 96,000 polling stations.

In addition, he suggested that members of elections commissions be elected for five-year terms and trained together with monitors, noting that only 626,000 of the 830,000 members of elections commissions working Dec. 4 had similar previous experience.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, addressing Churov and the Duma on Friday, called the elections chief and his colleagues "falsifiers" and accused them of bribing election officials.

A Communist deputy, Anatoly Lokot, presented Churov with scissors, hinting at the election official's 2007 promise to shave his beard if the elections proved to be falsified. "You have to fulfill your promises," Lokot told Churov, Interfax reported.

Churov, apparently unfazed, told a large crowd of reporters after his Duma speech that the meeting had passed "in a warm and friendly atmosphere."

Little doubt was cast on Churov's job going into the debate. The Duma's Legislation Committee decided Thursday that Churov's dismissal would violate federal law, which says a member of the Central Elections Commission can be replaced only as a result of a voluntary decision, death or a court order, Kommersant [reported](#) Friday.

The Central Elections Commission also voted Friday against considering Churov's dismissal, Interfax said.

In a possible attempt to put the Dec. 4 elections behind them, the Communists teamed up with the Liberal Democratic Party and United Russia on Friday to sign an agreement that promised amendments to election laws to make voting and vote-counting fairer and more transparent.

Sergei Ivanov, deputy head of the Duma's Legislation Committee and a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, told The Moscow Times that the party's faction signed the statement because it "declares two key ingredients: the possibility to amend election laws and the creation of a [Duma] commission to investigate the Dec. 4 voting results with the participation of all [parliamentary] parties."

Obukhov said his Communist Party had persuaded colleagues to form the commission "on a parity basis," meaning that an equal number of members from each faction would be included.

"Better a small fish than an empty dish," Obukhov said.

A Just Russia refused to join the alliance because it lacked three key points: a discussion of vote fraud, a call for Churov's dismissal and a demand to form election committees based only on political parties, senior member Mikhail Yemelyanov said.

"Naturally, we considered this statement to be a profanation," Yemelyanov said in an interview, adding that the Liberal Democrats and the Communists had criticized the statement but voted to adopt it anyway.

A Just Russia has submitted a bill to the Duma under which election officials can be fired by those who nominated them if the Duma or the Federation Council loses confidence in them, Interfax reported Friday.

Friday's Duma session was also attended by Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin, Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika and Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev, who reported on the Dec. 4 election violations. They mostly reiterated the figures they had announced earlier.

United Russia's youth wing, Young Guard, passed a report on election violations to the Central Elections Commission on Friday, Interfax reported.

Meanwhile, the Central Elections Commission on Friday officially rejected the registration of Grigory Yavlinsky, founder of the liberal opposition Yabloko party, and Irkutsk Governor Dmitry Mezentsev as presidential candidates in the March 4 election, citing a large percentage of invalid signatures.

The law obliges presidential candidates who are not members of a parliamentary faction to collect 2 million signatures in support of their bid.

Separately, Churov said the five parties that passed a 3 percent threshold at the Dec. 4 elections — the four parliamentary parties and Yabloko — would jointly get almost 1.3 billion rubles (\$42 million) from the federal budget in the near future. Of that amount, United Russia will get 648 million rubles.

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