

Russian Lawmakers to Observe U.S. Elections

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Communist Party lawmaker Olga Alimova, soon to depart for the U.S. to monitor the presidential vote, said she had only observed elections once previously, in Belarus.

When Olga Alimova flies to Washington next month, it will be the first time the Communist State Duma deputy visits the United States.

And it will be only the second time that Alimova assumes the role of an election observer; she served as an observer at the parliamentary elections in Belarus last month.

Her expectations are high. "I have heard that the U.S. has the most democratic elections in the world. I want to see whether that is really the case," Alimova told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview Tuesday.

The lawmaker from Saratov, on the Volga River, admitted that she speaks only rudimentary English, but said that would not be a problem since she would be traveling with an interpreter.

Alimova joins a group of more than 10 lawmakers from both houses of parliament who are set to monitor the elections as part of a more than 100-member observer mission for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE.

The mission's seven Duma representatives are mainly little-known backbenchers, with the exception of United Russia Deputy Ilya Kostunov, a former activist in the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth movement. Kostunov made headlines this summer by suggesting to extend a bill that forces foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations to acquire the label "foreign agent."

The mission will deploy mainly in eastern swing states like Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Virginia, OSCE spokesman Neil Simon said by telephone from Copenhagen.

The mission comes at a difficult time. During his campaign, U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney has attacked incumbent Barack Obama's reset on U.S.-Russian relations and called Russia the United States' "No. 1 geopolitical foe."

President Vladimir Putin openly accused the U.S. of supporting the opposition and the massive protest movement in the run-up to his election this spring.

On Tuesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry released a 56-page [report](#) in which it expressed "serious concern" about the human rights situation in the U.S.

At a Duma hearing a day earlier, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov accused Washington of aspiring to be "the world's tutor on democracy."

Moscow has bristled in the past at accusations of massive election fraud, which also triggered mass protests in the country over the past 11 months. Last year, then-President Dmitry Medvedev complained that OSCE observers were politicized and employed "double standards."

Russia is a founding member of the organization, which acts as a human rights and security watchdog for 56 countries. But Moscow is not sending anybody for the OSCE's main election observer mission in the U.S., which consists of professional observers and has already been dispatched by the organization's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Moscow has not seconded any staff for the 44 long-term observers who began their mission on Oct. 4, OSCE spokesman Thomas Rymer said by telephone from Warsaw.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that the U.S. imposes restrictions on foreign election observers because only a handful of states officially allow such observers. He told Rossiiskaya Gazeta in an interview published Tuesday that in the past Russian observers were not let into U.S. polling stations in many states. "When the word OSCE is uttered in the U.S., they start looking at you as if you had a speech impediment," he was quoted as saying.

One of the biggest Russian critics of American elections, Central Elections Commission chairman Vladimir Churov, is also not traveling to the U.S., a source in the commission said.

"None of us is going, but we will monitor the election via television and the Internet," said the source, who requested anonymity because she was not authorized to speak on the record.

Churov said in August that the organizational level of the U.S. presidential elections is among the worst in the world. He said that there was no universal right to vote in the U.S. because many states exclude ex-convicts and that elections were not direct because the president is voted in by the electoral college.

Alimova, the Communist Duma deputy, suggested that she was not disappointed that Churov would not travel to the U.S. “We have a long-standing joke: When Churov observes the U.S. elections, then Putin will win,” she said.

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