

Russian Orthodox join election fraud protests

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After a week of mounting protest over alleged fraud in Russia's parliamentary election, the Russian Orthodox Church has called for stricter control over the election process—evidence of the extent to which anger has spread in Russian society.

A demonstration in Moscow December 10 drew 25,000 people, police said, but opposition leaders said the numbers were at least 80,000. Smaller protests were held across Russia. The voice of the church could play a significant role as activists plan for demonstrations on successive Saturdays.

"I think that the situation that has taken shape must stir the authorities and various social forces to begin a national dialogue on the format of the electoral process and civic control over it," Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the Moscow Patriarchate's most prominent spokesman, told Pravmir, a widely cited Orthodox news site, after the demonstration.

Russia's Central Election Commission is often seen as allied with the Kremlin. Demonstrators have been calling for the resignation of commission chairman Vladimir Churov.

Chaplin told the Interfax news agency that the church was pleased that the demonstrations were peaceful. His statement came after days of strikingly frank statements by individual clergy about possible election fraud.

"That priests are ready to speak out openly about this, and speak of this with anger . . . and

speak of the possibility of public protest . . . several weeks ago, even several days ago, it would have been impossible to imagine," Sergei Chapnin, editor of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, said in an interview.

During the election campaign, Aleksei Pluzhnikov, a priest in Volgograd, wrote that he had been called in on three hours' notice by the local district government office, arriving to find a roomful of priests. They were addressed by a bureaucrat telling them to encourage parishioners to vote for United Russia, the party led by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. The *Volgograd Times* reported that priests were among demonstrators in Volgograd. —ENInews