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## RUSSIA ELECTION ALERT #9

### CEC restricts journalists' access to the electoral process

On 28 July 2021, the [Central Election Commission](#) adopted a new media accreditation procedure (without cancelling the old one) that restricts media access to observe and report on the electoral process and violates the freedom of media editorial policy. Independent Russian election experts fear a significant reduction in the openness and transparency of the work of election commissions and the facilitation of electoral fraud.



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Tightening of the rules of accreditation for journalists is assessed as a further step towards securing proper election results and should be seen in the light of the government's earlier actions to prevent the election of many prospective candidates linked to the opposition and Navalny's movement, the criminalisation of NGOs and active citizens through restrictive laws on so-called 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable international organisations', and the prevention of election observation by independent Russian and international organisations, [including ODIHR/OSCE](#).

The regulations on media access to the electoral process adopted on 28 July introduce new barriers to media accreditation on the one hand, and facilitate the removal of undesirable journalists from polling stations on the other.

It is worth recalling that between 1993 and 2016, the media were not required to be accredited at all during any elections, and journalists could, at least legally, cover elections from polling stations on the

basis of an editorial certificate. It was only in the 2016 State Duma elections that restrictions were introduced for the first time for journalists, who were required to have a paid contract with an editorial board, concluded no later than two months before the election date was announced (i.e. about 5 months before voting day).

Restrictions adopted ahead of the September 2021 State Duma elections include reducing the validity of accreditation to three days (17-19 September), during which voting will take place, and during a possible re-vote. The accreditation is therefore valid for a specific election and has to be reapplied for each time. Given the fact that local and by-elections are held in different regions of the Russian Federation several times a month, this provision significantly limits the possibility of covering local elections.

The period for editorial staff to apply for accreditation has been shortened from 60 to 50 days (from 30 July). There is also an obligation to send not only a written application, but also a photograph of each correspondent. Again, only journalists with whom editors have a contract of employment at least two months before the announcement of the election date, will be able to apply for accreditation.

In addition, the new draft on media accreditation stipulates that election commissions can conduct background checks on applications and request additional information from the editor-in-chief. The CEC has also included in the new regulations the checking of information provided by the editor-in-chief about accredited journalists in cooperation with other state bodies.

The most controversial fact among Russian independent election experts is that by introducing new regulations the CEC decided to take over control functions over mass media. Election commissions (Central Election Commission and Election Commissions of Subjects of the Federation) were given the right to withdraw accreditation from journalists if they fail to meet certain requirements, including:

- to respect the rights, legitimate interests, honour and dignity of voters, members of election commissions and other participants of the electoral process
- objectively and fairly report on the activities of election commissions
- not to conceal or falsify information of public importance
- do not violate public order and do not interfere with the work of election commissions.

Failure to comply with sanitary and epidemiological requirements in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic may also become a reason for withdrawal of accreditation. Recent cases of well-known opposition candidates such as Violetta Grudina and Lyubov Sobol, who were denied the opportunity to stand in elections, show how the pandemic can be used to restrict access to elections for citizens critical of the authorities.

Furthermore, a journalist's accreditation may be withdrawn if the commissions believe that he or she is gathering information "for a third party or a non-media organisation". No less controversial is the provision that accreditation can be withdrawn if a correspondent fails to comply with standards of professional ethics for journalists. "The CEC has gained the authority of a moral yardstick - whether or not a journalist adheres to ethical standards", assesses on his [Facebook page](#) Vasili Vaisenberg, an expert of the Movement Golos.

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