

Bogus International Monitors for the Bogus Russian Parliamentary Elections

Anton Shekhovtsov

With the gradual systemic decline of the democratic character of Russian presidential, parliamentary, and other elections, Vladimir Putin’s regime found it increasingly difficult to secure their international legitimacy. In the past, the European Parliament often criticised the conduct of elections in Russia, let alone the general political situation in the country characterised by the unfair competition between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary political forces. However, this year, the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs went as far as to [call on](#) the EU to “be prepared not to recognise the Parliament of Russia [...] if the 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia [were] recognised as fraudulent and having been conducted in violation of democratic principles and international law.” This potential move has precedence: after the massively fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus last year, the EU does not recognise the self-declared presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as legitimate.



Press briefing with group of French politicians, including MEP Thierry Mariani pictured here, invited to “monitor” the State Duma elections in Saint Petersburg, 19.09.2021. Source: politexpert.net – Evgeniy Zaytsev.

Especially during 2021, Putin’s regime took several major steps to de-legitimise Russian parliamentary elections. Russia’s most prominent opposition figure Alexey Navalny, whom the regime failed to assassinate in 2020, was [jailed](#) for what many believe to be political reasons. Navalny’s movement was [declared](#) extremist and eventually criminalised, forcing its leaders to leave the country or face imprisonment. An entire range of the most popular Russian independent media critical of the regime was [declared](#) either as foreign agents or undesirable organisations, which led to the financial collapse and closure of many of them. In summer this year, Russian authorities



announced that not only residents of Crimea and Sevastopol under control of the Russian occupation forces since 2014 would be able to cast their votes in the Russian parliamentary elections, but that also residents of the Russia-occupied eastern parts of Ukraine who were issued Russian passports in violation of international law would be allowed [to participate in the electoral process](#). Moreover, Russian authorities have [blocked](#) open access to CCTV cameras that were [installed](#) at polling stations in 2012 and helped observers monitor potential vote rigging; access to the cameras became limited only to representatives of the parties allowed to take part in the elections and monitoring organisations approved by the Putin regime.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext, Russia imposed limitations on the election observation mission by the most respectable and influential monitoring institution, OSCE ODIHR. The OSCE [assessed](#) that it would need to deploy 80 long-term and 420 short-term observers in Russia, but Moscow would invite only 60 OSCE observers. Eventually, the OSCE was compelled [not so send its observers to Russia](#). The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) did not send a regular election observation mission either, but it did send an [Election Assessment Mission](#) composed of five representatives of all five political groups in the Council of Europe.

Against this background, Russian authorities felt they needed loyal and uncritical international election observation for the parliamentary elections on 17-19 September 2021 even to a greater extent than before. In an attempt to give the impression of international legitimisation of the parliamentary elections, Russian authorities [reportedly](#) brought in 383 “international observers” and “experts” from 80 countries. Russia’s Central Election Commission (CEC) was in charge of accrediting [245 “international observers” from 59 countries](#) invited by the Russian parliament – they were largely representatives from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, CIS Interparliamentary Assembly, Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, Parliamentary Assembly of Belarus-Russia Union and some others. These international organisations and institutions never voice criticism of the elections conducted by Putin’s regime.

In its turn, the state-controlled “civil society institution” Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (CCRF) invited more than one hundred foreign individuals who would be referred to as “international public experts”. The category of “international experts” appeared in Russia several years ago – they were used by the regime to try to give the appearance of international legitimisation of Russian elections below the federal level, i.e. regional or local elections, or other forms of plebiscites. Loosely speaking, the status of “international experts” is lower than that of “international observers”. “International experts” are not accredited by the CEC and, officially, they cannot be referred to as “international observers”. For example, all foreign individuals who [monitored](#) the “all-Russian voting” on the amendments to the Russian Constitution in summer 2020 were not “international observers”, but “international experts” invited by the CCRF and not accredited by CEC.

At the same time, while “international experts” have the same authority in Russia as “international observers”, the former are not subject to the regulations applied to the latter – regulations [enshrined](#) in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers adopted in 2005. In fact, it is absolutely unclear how



“international public experts” are regulated in Russia at all, and what document, decree or law grants them the authority of officially accredited “international observers”. Nevertheless, the distinction between official “observers” and “public experts” is predominantly ignored by the Russian state-controlled or pro-regime media whose task or objective is to portray various aspects of Russian elections in the light most favourable to the Kremlin.

Moscow’s move to introduce the category of “international public experts” at the elections of the federal level can be explained by two major factors.

First, the systematic [work](#) of the Berlin-based European Platform for Democratic Elections aimed, in particular, at disclosing networks of politically biased (or, simply, [fake](#)) international election observation, as well as reports by European journalists, have created a specific political environment in Europe, in which participation in fake monitoring missions is now considered a toxic practice. Putting fake observers in the official category of “international public experts” is intended to protect them from criticism or even action against them on the part of national parliaments or the European Parliament.

Second, with the introduction of the category of “international public experts”, Russia’s CEC disclaims responsibility for fake observers’ frequent violations of the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers.

With a few major exceptions discussed below, all foreign individuals who came to Russia to “observe” elections and were not representatives of international organisations, were designated as “international public experts” and had corresponding badges.

The three largest groups of “international public experts” coming from EU countries were groups of politicians, activists, journalists and businessmen from Germany, Italy and France.

The group of German politicians featured exclusively members of the German far-right party “Alternative for Germany”: Gunnar Beck, Stefan Keuter, Olga Petersen, Gunnar Lindemann, Ulrich Singer, and Uli Henkel.

The group of Italian politicians was more politically diverse, but was still dominated by members of the right-wing Lega party: Filippo Ferrara, Paolo Grimoldi, Stefano Valdegamberi, and Raffaele Karfi. The overrepresentation of the Lega politicians among Italian “public experts” was surprising: while the Lega could be characterised as an openly pro-Kremlin party in the past, in recent months it became more cautious of Moscow and Lega’s MEPs voted in favour of several statements critical of Putin’s regime. Other Italian politicians who went to Russia in September were Margherita Saltini and Savino Spinelli from “Forward, Italy”, as well as Antonio Volpe from the Democratic Party.

The group of French politicians was not only the largest among all foreign politicians monitoring Russian elections – it was also the most curious. The majority of French politicians were represented by members of the far-right National Rally: Thierry Mariani accompanied by his assistants Sophie Guil and [Tamara Volokhova](#), Jean-Lin Lacapelle, Nicolas Bay, Hervé Juvin, Frédéric Boccaletti, and Stéphane Ravier. Apart from members of the National Rally, one could also see high-ranking



members of the centre-right Republicans: Jean-Claude Bouchet and Sylvie Goy-Chavent. The curious aspect of this group was that – unlike the overwhelming majority of foreign individuals designated as “international public experts” – French politicians were officially accredited as “international observers”. This fact could not be explained simply by the status of individuals. For example, Slovak MEP Miroslav Radačovský was an “international public expert”, but French MEP Thierry Mariani was an accredited “international observer”. Or German MP Stefan Keuter and Italian MP Paolo Grimoldi were “public experts”, but French MP Jean-Claude Bouchet was an “observer”.

One explanation for providing French politicians with a higher status than that of the majority of other foreign “monitors” is the French presidential and parliamentary elections that will take place in 2022. In today’s France, the political situation is fluid and unpredictable, but – due to its geopolitical significance – the country is a permanent target of malign Russian influence. By flattering French monitors, Moscow seems to be thinking it is conducting an operation of potential recruitment or, at the very least, friendly engagement in the future.

One other exception from the apparent rule about the official distinction between “observers” and “public experts” at the Russian elections was the disgraced duo of Spanish former politicians Pedro Agramunt and Jordi Xuclà. Agramunt was a chairman of the PACE, while Xuclà was an MP and a member of the PACE. In 2018, together with two other members of the PACE, Agramunt and Xuclà were [banned](#) from holding any senior posts in the organisation for 10 and 2 years respectively for taking bribes from the Azerbaijani ruling elites in exchange for [watering down](#) the PACE’s criticism of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev’s authoritarian regime, including electoral fraud conducted by the regime. Russian authorities apparently granted the status of “international observers” to Agramunt and Xuclà as a way of peculiar praise for their notorious contribution to the corrupt practices inherent to Putin’s Russia itself.

Apart from Russia, foreign individuals “monitored” illegitimate Russian parliamentary elections in annexed Crimea and Sevastopol as well. The group of “monitors” there was comprised of nine people, and, again, the French were overrepresented, while the status of French politicians differed from the rest. Thus, Jérôme Lambert, an MP from the centre-left Socialist Party, Michel Larive, an MP representing the far-left “Unsubmissive France”, and Michel Voisin, a former MP from the Republicans, were designated as “international observers”. The other six “monitors” – those who were not simultaneously French and politicians – were simply “international experts”: Maurice Bonnot (France), Janlisbert Velasco (Venezuela), Dušan Petrović, Srđan Drobnjaković, Zoran Mihajlović (Serbia), and Nesrine Mechi (Tunisia).

Interestingly, French MPs Lambert and Larive illegally travelled to Russia-annexed Crimea and Sevastopol not only in blatant violation of Ukraine’s internationally recognised borders, but also in defiance of the European Parliament’s [report](#) on the direction of EU-Russia political relations that urged the EU Member States to “take all possible measures to prevent their citizens from acting as international observers during the 2021 parliamentary elections in the occupied Crimea, which are being illegally organised by Russia”.



As one could expect, in Russia and annexed territories, the overwhelming majority of handpicked “international observers” and “international public experts” offered praise of the conduct of the Russian parliamentary elections, complimented Russian “technological innovations” in the electoral process, and positively compared the Russian elections to other electoral processes, often including those in their home countries.

More reports on politically biased election observation can be found [here](#) and our database on “fake” election observers is available at www.fakeobservers.org.

More information also available at www.epde.org

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