

Politically Biased International Election Observation at the 2018 Regional Elections in Russia

Report by Anton Shekhovtsov



Pedro Mouriño, Peter W. Schulze, Alberto Bianco Source: <http://www.shtab.opmoscow.ru>

Executive summary

- The Russian organisation National Social Monitoring (NSM) coordinated by Roman Kolomoiytsev invited 10 international experts to attend the regional elections in several Russian oblasts during the so-called single voting day. They were not officially accredited by Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) as election observers, but the Russian media and individual members of the CEC often referred to them as observers.
- Neither the CEC nor the NSM published a full list of the invited international experts; however, using OSINT methods we have identified 9 out of 10 international experts from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Among them there were political activists and politicians (including one Member of the European Parliament), lawyers, businessmen, an academic and a former diplomat.

- The majority of the invited international experts have a history of participating in various pro-Kremlin efforts such as (1) taking part in the politically biased election observation missions in Russia and Ukraine, (2) attempting to legitimise the illegitimate electoral processes in Transnistria and Crimea, (3) illegally visiting Russia-annexed Crimea and justifying the annexation of this Ukraine's republic, and (4) regularly providing pro-Kremlin comments to the Russian state-controlled media.
- The analysis of Russian media reports on the Russian elections on the single voting day and profiles of the international experts suggests that they were invited to Russia for two main reasons: (1) to boost the legitimacy of the elections with the Russian audience as the main addressee, and (2) to promote the allegedly positive image of Russia on the international stage.

Introduction

During the single voting day on the 9th of September 2018, Russia elected 26 regional heads, 7 members of the State Duma, members of 16 regional councils, 4 regional city mayors, and several thousands of municipal heads and council members.¹ Arguably the most important election was the election of the Moscow city mayor.

On the 17th of August 2018, chairwoman of Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) Ella Pamfilova declared that the CEC was not planning to invite international observers to monitor regional elections, adding that international observers could still monitor the by-election of members of the State Duma, while Russian observers could invite international experts who would attend the regional elections.² International experts, whose badges would feature the word "Guest", a country of origin and their names, would not be officially accredited by the CEC as international observers.

No international observers offered their services to monitor the by-election to the State Duma, but the Russian organisation National Social Monitoring (NSM) coordinated by Roman invited 10 international experts to attend the regional elections in several Russian oblasts.

The NSM was founded in August 2017 as the "network of independent observers uniting leading social organisations", including "For Clean Elections", "Group 32", "Russia Elects", "People's Observer", "Open Alliance of Observers" and dozens of regional organisations.³ For the international observation of the regional elections on the single voting day on the 10th of September 2017, the NSM invited 27 international experts,⁴ i.e. 17 people more than in 2018.

¹ Aleksandra Beluza, "Galochki prileteli", *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 1 September (2018), <https://rg.ru/2018/08/29/vybory-raznogo-urovnia-projdu-9-sentiabria-v-80-regionah-rossii.html>.

² "Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli poka ne khotyat monitorit' dovybory v Gosdumu", *Rossia segodnya*, 17 August (2018), <https://ria.ru/politics/20180817/1526724361.html>.

³ "O proekte", *Natsional'ny obshchestvenny monitoring*, <https://nom24.ru/about/>.

⁴ "Za vyborami v Rossii budut nablyudat' 27 mezhdunarodnykh ekspertov", *Rossia segodnya*, 8 September (2017), <https://ria.ru/politics/20170908/1502089440.html>.

In summer 2018, the NSM’s Kolomoiytsev tried to reach out to several individuals and invite them to attend the regional elections in September 2018. In his invitation letters, Kolomoiytsev stated that the NSM was “interested in assistance of holding free fair and transparent elections with the opportunity for international experts to attend the elections for the purpose of giving impartial assessment of the Russian elections”. As the NSM “would like to continue the development of such important values as



Peter W. Schulze, Roman Kolomoiytsev Source: <http://www.cikrf.ru>

transparency, openness and publicity”, Kolomoiytsev wondered whether his addressees could “visit Russia in September”. It is unclear how many invitations in total Kolomoiytsev sent out, but it seems viable to suggest that he wanted to invite more than 10 “international experts” to attend the regional elections.

International experts at the Russian 2018 regional elections and their established involvement in previous pro-Kremlin efforts

Neither the CEC nor the NSM has published a full list of the international experts who were present at the polling stations during the single voting day, but the analysis of Russian media reports allowed us to identify 9 out of 10 international experts, see Table 1.

Table 1. Identified international experts invited by the National Social Monitoring to observe the Russian elections during the single voting day.

| No. | Country | Name | Affiliation | Russian region/city of attendance |
|-----|---------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. | Belgium | Philippe Chansay Wilmotte | Saint Michael Archangel Collective | *unknown |
| 2. | France | Eugène Berg | *unknown | Novosibirsk and Kemerovo Oblasts |
| 3. | France | Patrick Brunot | *unknown | Vladimir Oblast |
| 4. | France | Aymeric Chauprade | MEP, Les Français Libres | Omsk Oblast |
| 5. | France | Véronique Rouez | *unknown | Vladimir Oblast |
| 6. | France | Jean-Michel Vernochet | *unknown | Ulyanovsk Oblast |
| 7. | Germany | Peter W. Schulze | University of Göttingen | Moscow, Moscow Oblast |
| 8. | Italy | Alberto Bianco | Deputy Mayor of Barbaresco | Moscow, Moscow Oblast |
| 9. | Spain | Pedro Mouriño | IberAtlantic Global Corporation | Moscow, Moscow Oblast |



On the 7th of September 2018, several international experts met with the representatives of the NSM, the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, and the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (also known in the Russian media as SPCh).⁵ In the beginning of the meeting, Igor Borisov, who co-chairs the election monitoring group of the SPCh and also heads the Russian Public Institute of Election Law, greeted the present international experts as “friends whom we know for a long time”.⁶ Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the international experts invited to monitor the elections in September 2018 have a record of previous involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts, including, but not limited to, (1) previous participation in politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions in Russia and elsewhere; (2) legitimisation and justification of the actions of the Russian Federation directed at undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; and (3) cooperation with the Russian state-controlled instruments of disinformation and propaganda (RT, Sputnik, etc.).

Belgian lawyer **Philippe Chansay Wilmotte**, a member of the far-right “Saint Michael Archangel Collective”, observed the 2007 parliamentary elections in Russia as part of the politically biased monitoring mission led Polish pro-Kremlin activist Mateusz Piskorski who was arrested by the Polish police in 2016 on suspicion of participating in the activities of the Russian civilian intelligence directed against the Republic of Poland.⁷ In 2007, **Wilmotte** also participated in the mission in Transnistria occupied by the Russian “peace-keeping” forces; the mission was organised by CIS-EMO, a Russian organisation known for its long-time involvement of coordinating politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions.⁸ In March 2018, **Wilmotte** participated in the politically biased election observation mission organised by the Federation Assembly to monitor the Russian presidential election.⁹

French lawyer **Patrick Brunot**, who represented Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in a libel case against a French newspaper and has been in contact with Russian ultranationalists since the 1990s, participated in the CIS-EMO’s 2007 mission in Transnistria, and illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea in September 2017 to deliver a lecture at a university. In March 2018, **Brunot** participated in the politically biased election observation mission organised by the Federation Assembly to monitor the Russian presidential election.

⁵ “Sopredsedatel’ MRG SPCh Igor Borisov vstretilsya s inostrannymi electoral’nymi ekspertami”, *SPCh*, 9 September (2018), <http://www.president-sovet.ru/presscenter/news/read/4898/>.

⁶ Lev Moskovkin, “Paradoks: est’ mezhdunarodnoe nablyudenie, a tseley i zadach ne stavit ni odna organizatsiya”, *Livejournal*, 7 September (2018), <https://leo-mosk.livejournal.com/5366980.html>.

⁷ See more on Piskorski in Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2018), pp. 113-117.

⁸ See more on CIS-EMO in Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, pp. 103-110.

⁹ See Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election” (Berlin: EPDE, 2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-foreign-electoral-observation-at-the-russian-2018-presidential-election-1423.html>.

Aymeric Chauprade, a former member of the French far-right National Front and current vice-president of the Eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group at the European parliament, had been involved in various pro-Kremlin efforts since at least 2013. **Chauprade** observed the illegitimate Crimean “referendum” in March 2014 and was a regular commentator for the Russian state-controlled media such as RT, Voice of Russia (discontinued at the end of 2013) and Sputnik.



Aymeric Chauprade Source: omskportal.ru

Véronique Rouez took part in the CIS-EMO’s electoral monitoring mission at the Ukrainian parliamentary elections in 2012. In March 2018, **Rouez** participated in the politically biased election observation mission organised by the Federation Assembly to monitor the Russian presidential election.

Conspiracy theorist **Jean-Michel Vernochet** is a regular commentator for the Russian state-controlled Sputnik website and has supported Russia’s cooperation with Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria. In March 2018, **Vernochet** participated in the politically biased election observation mission organised by the Federation Assembly to monitor the Russian 2018 presidential election.

Professor **Peter W. Schulze** based at the University of Göttingen participated in Piskorski’s politically biased monitoring mission at the 2011 parliamentary elections in Russia. **Schulze** is also a regular commentator for RT and Sputnik.

Spanish former politician from the People’s Party **Pedro Mouriño** participated in Piskorski’s politically biased monitoring missions at the Russian 2011 parliamentary elections and Russian 2012 presidential elections, observed the illegitimate Crimean “referendum” in March 2014, and took part in the politically biased election observation mission organised by the Federation Assembly to monitor the Russian 2018 presidential election. **Mouriño** is also a regular commentator for RT.

Going beyond electoral observation

As it is always the case with politically biased election observation missions organised by Russian pro-Kremlin organisations and/or state institutions, the international experts’ visit to Russia in September 2018 was used by the Russian authorities for political purposes and, in particular, to promote the allegedly positive image of Russia on the international stage using the invited international experts as potential agents of the Kremlin’s influence in Europe.

Reporting on the forthcoming arrival of the international experts to Russia, a member of the CEC Vasilii Likhachev, who coordinated international cooperation in the CEC, described them as “people with the

great expert experience, who adhere[d] to the principles of impartiality [and] who already express[ed] their desire to go and monitor the voting processes in the regions during the single voting day”.¹⁰ Likhachev would later reveal the political significance of their arrival to Russia. “These international experts – 10 people in total – represent the leading countries so the European Union – France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Italy”. Importantly, he also added that because they were coming from the *leading* countries of the EU, it was not possible to talk about the “alleged isolation of Russia” most likely referring to the EU’s criticism of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and sanctions imposed on Russia for that aggression.¹¹

The SPCh’s Igor Borisov also stressed the political significance of the international experts’ visit to Russia during their meeting with representatives of the CEC and other Russian state organisations on the eve of the elections. Addressing the international experts, Borisov thanked them “for the opportunity to continue a constructive dialogue between the peoples of Europe”, and added: “Although some politicians are trying to drop the ‘iron curtain’ around Russia, our peoples are always ready to lend a helping hand to each other and contribute to the development of a dialogue, mutual help and public diplomacy in the interests of democracy and rule of law”.¹² At the same meeting, the CEC’s Likhachev thanked the international experts for their “attention to the electoral process [in Russia] and assistance in forming an objective image of the Russian elections at the international level”.¹³

The analysis of the international experts’ remarks during various meetings with state officials and their comments to the Russian media shows that they – especially those who already participated in different pro-Kremlin efforts in the past – understood that the rationale behind their visit to Russia went beyond election observation activities and had political significance.

Talking to the Russian TASS news agency on the 22nd of August 2018, Pedro Mourinho said that he would go to Russia in September “to monitor the moods of the voters” adding that “voters in the [Moscow] city centre, on its outskirts and outside of it differed from each other”,¹⁴ as if these alleged emotional or psychological differences had anything to do with assessing the fairness, credibility or transparency of the elections. It seems that, in his commentary, he wanted to create an impression that he was already satisfied with the forthcoming elections, as he mentioned that he had observed several Russian elections and argued that he could “with absolute certainty assert that all the previous elections had been conducted in compliance with the international standards”.¹⁵

During a meeting of the international experts with the representatives of the CEC, Federation Council and SPCh that took place on the eve of the elections, Véronique Rouez felt that she could already say that

¹⁰ Mar’yam Gulaliev, “Mezhdunarodnye eksperty pribyvayut v Rossiyu dlya monitoringa vyborov, soobshchili v TsIK”, *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, 4 September (2018), <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/mezhdunarodnye-eksperty-pribyvayut-v-rossiyu-dlya-monitoringa-vyborov-soobshchili-v-cik.html>.

¹¹ “Za vyborami v rossiyskikh regionakh budut nablyudat’ desyat’ ekspertov iz ES”, *Rossiya segodnya*, 8 September (2018), <https://ria.ru/politics/20180908/1528099236.html>.

¹² “Mezhdunarodnye elektoral’nye eksperty nachali monitoring gotovnosti ko dnyu golosovaniya 9 sentyabrya”, *Natsional’ny obshchestvenny monitoring*, 8 September (2018), <https://nom24.ru/info/opinion/mezhdunarodnye-elektoralnye-eksperty-nachali-monitoring-gotovnosti-ko-dnyu-golosovaniya-9-sentyabrya/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Mezhdunarodny ekspert Assotsiatsii NOM planiruet posetit’ izbiratel’nye uchastki 9 sentyabrya”, *Natsional’ny obshchestvenny monitoring*, 22 August (2018), <https://nom24.ru/info/opinion/mezhdunarodnyy-ekspert-assotsiatsii-nom-planiruet-posetit-izbiratelnye-uchastki-9-sentyabrya/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Russia had made “a major step towards increasing transparency” of the elections, while Eugène Berg highlighted “the openness of the Russian electoral system for foreign experts”.¹⁶

Some of the international experts’ comments aimed at convincing the Russian audience that Russian elections were more democratic and/or advanced than in their home countries. Aymeric Chauprade praised the Russian optical scan voting system (known in Russian language as KOIB) adding that in Russia – in comparison to France – “there [were] more guarantees for the voters that they could express their opinions and be sure that nobody would seize their votes”.¹⁷ Pedro Mouriño also commended the KOIB, as well as surveillance cameras, saying that the Russian election-related technological infrastructure was better than in Spain.¹⁸



Patrick Brunot, Véronique Rouez Source: <http://gubernator33.ru>

However, the more recurring narrative was that on the importance of the international observation in improving the Russian international image. As she shared her impressions of the voting process with the Russian media on the election day, Véronique Rouez expressed her hope that even more international experts would be invited to the next Russian elections, as many would have an opportunity “to assure

¹⁶ “Mezhdunarodnye elektoral’nye eksperty nachali monitoring gotovnosti”.

¹⁷ “Deputat Evroparlamenta Emerik Shoprad: Na vyborakh v Omskoy oblasti soblyudeny vse demokraticheskie protsedury”, *Omskaya Guberniya*, 9 September (2018), <http://omskportal.ru/ru/government/News/2018/09/09/1536473747234.html>.

¹⁸ Damir Matyukhin, Elena Kononova, Zhanna Samardakova, ““Luchshe, chem v Ispanii”. Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli otmetili vysokiy uroven’ organizatsii vyborov v Rossii”, *360 TV*, 9 September (2018), <https://360tv.ru/news/vybory/Navyvste-Mezhdunarodnye-nablyudateli-otmetili-organizatsiju-vyborov-v-rossi/>.

themselves personally of the transparency of the electoral system in Russia”.¹⁹ At the same time, Patrick Brunot presumed that people in France “knew very little about the internal politics, culture and history of Russia”, and, therefore, one of the French international experts’ aims was “to report to their fellow citizens the entire gamut of the situation in Russia”.²⁰ Furthermore, at the meeting with the CEC’s secretary Maya Grishina and the CEC’s Nikolay Levichev and Vasiliy Likhachev on the 10th of September, Peter Schulze argued that “the collaborative work of Russian independent observers and international electoral experts [would] present, on the world stage, an objective assessment of the electoral procedures in Russia and help change the prejudiced attitude to the [Russian electoral] processes in the international information space”.²¹

Conclusion

Established election monitoring organisations did not send any observers to monitor the Russian regional elections held on the single voting day on the 9th of September 2018. However, the Russian National Social Monitoring organisation, apparently in agreement with the Central Election Commission (CEC) invited 10 foreign individuals to observe the elections in the capacity of international experts.

Most of the invited international experts have a record of involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts. These include, but are not limited to:

- taking part in the politically biased election observation missions at the Russian parliamentary elections (2007, 2011), Russian presidential elections (2012, 2018), Ukrainian parliamentary elections (2012).
- observing and, thus, attempting to legitimise the illegitimate electoral processes in Transnistria (2007) and Crimea (2014)
- illegally visiting Russia-annexed Crimea
- regularly providing pro-Kremlin comments to the Russian state-controlled media (RT, Voice of Russia, Sputnik)

Despite the fact that the international experts were not accredited by Russia’s CEC as official election observers, Russian media, as well as individual members of the CEC, often referred to them as *observers* and stated that they had *observed* the elections. These discursive tactics were aimed at (1) boosting the legitimacy of the elections with the Russian audience as the main addressee, and (2) promoting the allegedly positive image of Russia on the international stage using the invited international experts as potential agents of the Kremlin’s influence in Europe.

¹⁹ Teleradiokompaniya Guberniya 33, “2018 09 10 Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli na vladimirskikh vyborakh”, *YouTube*, 10 September (2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVCfnf3Fz2E>.

²⁰ “Mezhdunarodnye eksperty izuchili sistemu organizatsii i provedeniya regional’nykh vyborov na primere Vladimira i Suzdalya”, *GTRK “Vladimir”*, 10 September (2018), <http://vladtv.ru/society/95529/>.

²¹ “Mezhdunarodnye elektoral’nye eksperty peredali v TsIK Rossii zaklyuchenie po itogam nablyudeniya na vyborakh 9 sentyabrya”, *Natsional’ny obshchestvenny monitoring*, 10 September (2018), <https://nom24.ru/info/opinion/mezhdunarodnye-elektoralnye-eksperty-peredali-v-tsik-rossii-zaklyuchenie-po-itogam-nablyudeniya-na-v/>.