

CONTROVERSIAL “INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION” AT THE 2019 REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

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Executive summary

In July 2019, the Moscow City Election Commission (MCEC) refused to register the overwhelming majority of independent opposition candidates for the elections to the Moscow City Duma. In order to neutralise the negative effects of the MCEC's decision, which provoked mass protests in Moscow and undermined the legitimacy of the elections, Russian state institutions and pro-regime organisations resorted to a two-pronged strategy.

First, the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law (RPIEL) headed by Igor Borisov invited – in cooperation with the Central Election Committee (CEC) and Russia's Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights – around 16 foreign individuals to observe the elections in the capacity of “international experts”, the majority of whom have a record of involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts, including, but not limited to:

- taking part in the politically biased election observation missions in Russia and elsewhere;
- attempting to legitimise the illegitimate electoral processes;
- justifying Russia's actions directed at undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity;
- regularly providing pro-Kremlin comments to the Russian state-controlled media;
- organising events aimed at amplifying pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Second, the CEC invited dozens of heads of national election management bodies, senior officials from international organisations, and “international experts” to participate in a conference titled “Digitalisation of Electoral Processes. Humanitarian Dimension,” scheduled to take place during the voting day. Some of the conference participants were taken to the Public Headquarters for

Control and Observation of the Elections to the Moscow City Duma and the CEC's Information Centre, and thus were exposed to the Russian pro-Kremlin media.

Russian officials and pro-regime media and organisations used the “international observers” and some participants of the conference “Digitalisation of Electoral Processes” to:

- provide international legitimacy to the elections with the Russian audience as the main addressee;
- boost the image of Russia as a world leader of election-related “technological innovations”;
- 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; and
- promote a conspiracy theory that Western institutions tried to interfere in the Russian regional elections.

Introduction

On the single voting day of 8 September 2019, Russia elected governors in 19 federal subjects and members of legislative bodies in 13 federal subjects.¹

Elections to the Moscow City Duma have arguably been the most controversial. The Moscow City Election Commission (MCEC) refused to register the overwhelming majority of independent candidates representing Russian opposition forces. This refusal led to mass protests in Moscow calling for free and democratic elections. The protests were brutally suppressed by the police and National Guard, and were followed by the detention of several independent candidates and prominent opposition figures, as well as dozens of protesters. Spokesperson for the EU's Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Maja Kocijančič stated that these detentions, the disproportionate use of force, arrests, and raids against opposition politicians “seriously undermine[d] the fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly” that were “enshrined in the Russian constitution”.² PACE President Liliane Maury Pasquier expressed her deep concern “about the massive arrests of demonstrators and the disproportionate reaction

- 1 On the background of the elections and their outcome, see also Jadwiga Rogoża, “Russia Election Alert #1 – Devaluation of Election Institution ahead of Regional Elections”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 5 September (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/russia-election-alert-1-devaluation-of-election-institution-ahead-of-regional-elections.html>; Jadwiga Rogoża, “Election Alert #2 – Outcome of the Regional Elections and Violations Encountered by Independent Observers”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 12 September (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/russia-election-alert-2-the-outcome-of-the-regional-elections-in-russia-8th-september-2019-and-the-violations-encountered-by-ind.html>.
- 2 Maja Kocijančič, “Statement by the Spokesperson on the Detention of over a Thousand Peaceful Protesters in Moscow”, *European Union External Action*, 27 July (2019), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/65919/statement-spokesperson-detention-over-thousand-peaceful-protesters-moscow_en.

of the police”, stressing that “freedom of speech and freedom of assembly [were] essential conditions for democracy”.³

On 21 August 2019, 57 candidates who had been registered for the elections in Moscow and St. Petersburg appealed to Secretary General of the OSCE Thomas Greminger, Director of the OSCE ODIHR Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, and President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly George Tsereteli, asking them to send international observers to monitor elections in Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁴ In their appeal, the signatories referred to Articles 6 and 8 of the 1990 CSCE/OSCE Copenhagen Document.⁵ Article 6 states that the participating states will “respect the right of their citizens to take part in the governing of their country, either directly or through representatives freely chosen by them through fair electoral processes”, while Article 8 notes that the participating states will endeavour to facilitate access of foreign and domestic observers to election proceedings held not only on the national level (for example, presidential and parliamentary elections), but also below the national level (for example, regional elections).

The secretary of Russia’s Central Election Committee (CEC) Maya Grishina declared on 22 August 2019 that only Russian state authorities and CEC had the right to invite international observers, and that inviting international observers to monitor regional elections in Russia was not envisaged by the legislation in force.⁶ Indeed, only Russian federal laws on parliamentary and presidential elections mention and define international observation, but, at the same time, no Russian law forbids international observation of elections below the national level. However, Russian institutions seem to adhere to a rigid interpretation of the legislation: everything that is not explicitly authorised is, therefore, forbidden. As our report on politically biased international election observation at the 2018 regional elections in Russia showed,⁷ the CEC would not accredit as international observers even those foreign individuals who have a history

3 “Arrests in Moscow: President Expresses Deep Concern”, *Parliamentary Assembly*, 28 July (2019), <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/News/News-View-EN.asp?newsid=7587&lang=2&cat=15>.

4 “Moscow and St. Petersburg Candidates Call on the OSCE to Monitor Regional Elections”, *Free Russia*, 22 August (2019), <https://www.4freerussia.org/moscow-and-st-petersburg-candidates-call-on-the-osce-to-monitor-regional-elections/>.

5 “Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE”, *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, 29 June (1990), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304>.

6 “V TsIK zayavili, chto ne mogut priglasit’ mezhdunarodnykh nablyudateley na regional’nye vybory”, *TASS*, 22 August (2019), <https://tass.ru/politika/6789803>.

7 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased International Election Observation at the 2018 Regional Elections in Russia”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 5 October (2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-international-election-observation-at-the-2018-regional-elections-in-russia.html>.

of participating in various pro-Kremlin efforts and who would presumably be ready to promote the allegedly positive image of Russia on the international stage. However, in order to boost the legitimacy of the 2018 regional elections, Russian pro-regime observers invited foreign individuals who were officially referred to as “international experts” rather than “observers”, and who attended the elections in this capacity.

The 2019 regional elections were no exception. Because of the MCEC’s refusal to register the majority of independent opposition candidates, the elections were characterised by ambiguous legitimacy, and Russian state structures, as well as Russian pro-Kremlin organisations, were tasked with providing international legitimisation of the controversial electoral process. However, unlike in 2018, when Russian pro-Kremlin organisations such as the National Social Monitoring (renamed into Independent Social Monitoring in July 2019) brought 10 “international experts” to attend the regional elections, Russian actors resorted to a more elaborate, two-pronged strategy in 2019.

Russia’s two-pronged strategy for “international observation”

The first “prong” of this strategy was the duplication of the trick with the “international experts”: pro-Kremlin organisations, in cooperation with Russia’s Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (also known in the Russian media as SPCh), invited “international experts” who would go to the polling stations in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as Vologda, Lipetsk, and Tula oblasts, and issue positive remarks about the electoral process. The pro-Kremlin NGO (or GONGO⁸) “Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law” (RPIEL), headed by the SPCh’s member Igor Borisov, initially approached the “international experts”, while the CEC sent official letters of invitation for visa purposes. However, despite the involvement of several Russian organisations in the process of engaging with “international experts”, no Russian institution either published a full list of them or even stated their exact number. Using OSINT methods, we have identified 16 such individuals, see Table 1.

8 GONGO stands for “government-organised non-governmental organization”.

Table 1. Identified “international experts” invited to observe the Russian regional elections during the 2019 single voting day.

Country	Name	Affiliation/place of work	Russian region/city of attendance
France	Aymeri de Montesquiou-Fezensac d'Artagnan	Republican Party	Vologda Oblast
France	Eugène Berg	School of Advanced International and Political Studies	St. Petersburg
France	Patrick Brunot	*unknown	Moscow
France	Emmanuel Leroy	Association France-Europe-Russia Alliance	Moscow
France	Alesya Miloradovich	*unknown	Vologda Oblast
France	Véronique Rouez	*unknown	Moscow
France	Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann	Eurocontinent	Moscow
France/ Denmark	Dan Shefet	Cabinet Shefet	Moscow
Germany	Peter W. Schulze	Dialogue of Civilisations	St. Petersburg
Italy	Alberto Bianco	Deputy Mayor of Barbaresco	Moscow
Portugal/ Italy	Marco Marsili	Catholic University of Portugal	Tula Oblast
Serbia	Božidar Delić	Serbian Radical Party	Moscow
Serbia	Stefan Svrkota	Dveri	*unknown
Spain	Pedro Mouriño	IberAtlantic Global Corporation	Moscow
Sweden/ New Zealand	Gregory Simons	Uppsala University	Tula Oblast
Switzerland	Sämi Meier	Studhalter & Pfister Rechtsanwälte AG	Lipetsk Oblast

The second “prong” of the pro-regime tactics aimed at legitimising the elections was quite unorthodox. In summer 2019, the CEC declared that it would hold an International Conference titled “Digitalisation of Electoral Processes. Humanitarian Dimension”, scheduled to take place in Moscow on 6-8 September 2019, and discuss “the innovations in the elections in the Russian Federation”.⁹ For this conference, the CEC invited dozens of heads of national election management bodies from 24 countries and the internationally unrecognised “state” of “South Ossetia”, as well as senior officials from international organisations. The list of conference participants also included seven “international experts”,

9 “International Conference ‘Digitalization of Electoral Processes. Humanitarian Dimension’”, *Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation*, http://www.cikrf.ru/eng/international/int_conference/.

featuring Igor Borisov from the SPCh/RPIEL. Borisov's inclusion in a list titled "International Experts" was surprising as he is a Russian national, yet is important to note because it shows a clear connection between the two "prongs" of the strategy to provide international legitimacy to the 2019 elections.

The timing of the conference "Digitalisation of Electoral Processes" was hardly accidental: the single voting day was scheduled for 8 September, which coincided with the last official day of the conference. The CEC's aim was to indirectly involve foreign electoral officials and representatives of international organisations in the process of legitimisation of the controversial elections, especially in Moscow. The structure of the conference programme seemed to have been drafted specifically to facilitate the implementation of the CEC's aim. First, the conference itself – namely, individual presentations and discussions of Russian "technological innovations" – ended already on 6 September. Second, the next day, 7 September, was mostly dedicated to the "cultural programme", as if to appease the participants of the conference on the eve of the voting day: the CEC took them on a cruise down the Moskva River, to a concert, on sightseeing tour in a Moscow park, and to a dinner aboard a river boat – enjoyable activities that had hardly anything to do with "technological innovations" in the elections. Third, on voting day, the conference participants visited the Public Headquarters for Control and Observation of the Elections to the Moscow City Duma, as well as the CEC's Information Centre, and thus were exposed to the Russian pro-Kremlin media that implicitly interpreted their visits to both offices as an act of legitimisation of the elections marred by the MCEC's refusal to register independent opposition candidates and consequent mass protests.

As the number of the "international experts" (see Table 1) and the participants of the conference "Digitalisation of Electoral Processes" amounted to around 40, this was sufficient for the Russian pro-Kremlin tabloid *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (*Komsomol Truth*) to declare that "international observers from 50 countries monitored the elections" to the Moscow City Duma,¹⁰ as if the CEC had not explicitly declared that it could not give accreditation to international observers to monitor the Russian regional elections.

10 Kseniya Bogdanova, "Na vyborah v Mosgordumu ne otmecheno ni odnogo narusheniya", *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, 8 September (2019), <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/3599661/>. My emphasis.

Established involvement of the “international experts” in previous pro- Kremlin efforts

The overwhelming majority of the “international experts” invited to observe the elections in September 2019 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; (3) cooperation with Russian state-controlled instruments of disinformation and propaganda (RT and Sputnik); and (4) organisation of events aimed at amplifying pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Mayor of the tiny French town of Marsan, **Aymeri de Montesquiou-Fezensac d’Artagnan**, who was indicted for accepting bribes and money laundering in relation to the so-called Kazakhgate,¹¹ took part in the politically biased international monitoring mission to the Russian regional elections in September 2017.

11 Fabrice Pouliquen, “Kazakhgate’: Le sénateur UDI Aymeri de Montesquiou mis en examen”, *20 minutes*, 9 July (2015), <https://www.20minutes.fr/politique/1649375-20150709-kazakhgate-senateur-udi-aymeri-montesquiou-mis-examen>.



“International experts” Aymeri de Montesquiou-Fezensac dArtagnan and Alesya Miloradovich

Source: <https://vologda.mk.ru/politics/2019/09/08/vybory-gubernatora-vologodskoy-oblasti-onlayntranslyaciya.html>

Eugène Berg, former representative in Russia of the French oil and gas company Total, took part in the politically biased international monitoring mission to the Russian regional elections in September 2018.¹²

French lawyer **Patrick Brunot**, who has been in contact with Russian ultranationalists since the 1990s, participated in several politically biased election observation missions, namely the 2007 “presidential election” in Transnistria, 2018 Russian presidential election¹³, and 2018 Russian regional elections. **Brunot** also illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea in September 2017 to deliver a lecture at a university.

12 Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased International Election Observation at the 2018 Regional Elections in Russia”.

13 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 16 April (2018), https://www.epde.org/en/documents/category/russia.html?file=files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2018%20Russian%20Elections/_Anton%20Shekhovtsov%20-%20Politically%20Biased%20Foreign%20Electoral%20Observation%20at%20the%20Russian%202018%20Presidential%20Election_fin.pdf.



“International experts” Eugène Berg and Peter W. Schulze

Source: https://78.ru/news/2019-09-07/v_peterburg_dlya_proverki_hoda_viborov_pribili_inostrannie_nablyudateli



“International expert” Emmanuel Leroy

Source: <http://council.gov.ru/events/news/107615/>



“International experts” Stefan Svrkota, Božidar Delić and Véronique Rouez

Source: <http://council.gov.ru/events/news/107615/>

French far-right activist **Emmanuel Leroy** is an associate of Russian fascist Alexander Dugin and a member of the National Front party, known for its pro-Kremlin positions. He is also a member of the Association France-Europe-Russia Alliance, involved in promoting Russian foreign policy interests in France, and a co-founder of the association “Donbass Children Emergency”, aimed at supporting the Russia-backed separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” in Eastern Ukraine.

Alesya Miloradovich co-organised an illegal trip of 22 children from France to Russia-annexed Crimea in August 2016,¹⁴ and took part in the politically biased observation missions to the regional elections in Russia in 2017 and 2018.

Véronique Rouez took part in the electoral monitoring mission to the Ukrainian parliamentary elections in 2012. The mission was organised by the Russian pro-Kremlin organisation CIS-EMO. Rouez also participated in the politically biased election observation missions to monitor the 2018 Russian presidential election and Russian regional elections in 2017 and 2018.

14 “French Authorities Denied Help to Kids Travelling to Crimea’s Artek Camp”, *Sputnik*, 27 August (2016), <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201608261044676473-france-kidscrimea/>.



“International experts” Marco Marsili and Gregory Simons

Source: https://tula.aif.ru/politic/mezhdunarodnye_nablyudateli_sledyat_za_vyborami_v_tulskoy_oblasti

Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann, a researcher based at the French Institute of Geopolitics (Paris 8), is a regular commentator for Russian state-controlled media such as RT and Sputnik.

Professor **Peter W. Schulze**, based at the University of Göttingen, participated in the politically biased monitoring missions at the 2011 Russian parliamentary elections and 2018 Russian regional elections. **Schulze** is a regular commentator for RT and Sputnik.

Alberto Bianco participated in the politically biased observation mission to the 2018 Russian regional elections.

Marco Marsili, an Italian researcher based at the Research Centre of the Institute for Political Studies of the Catholic University of Portugal, observed the illegitimate Russian “presidential election” in Russia-annexed Crimea in 2018.¹⁵

15 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 3 April (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/category/russia.html?file=files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2018%20Russian%20Elections/Foreign%20Observation%20Crimea%20in%20March%202018.pdf>.

Retired Major General of the Army of Serbia and Montenegro **Božidar Delić** is a member of the Serbian Radical Party, known for its anti-EU and pro-Kremlin positions. In 2018, he illegally visited the Russia-backed separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” to give a lecture at a university.

Stefan Svrkota, a member of the council of foreign policy of the ultranationalist Serbian Movement Dveri, illegally visited Crimea in October 2015 as part of the delegation from Serbia that included politicians from Dveri and the national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia.

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

Gregory Simons, an Associate Professor at the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Uppsala University, organised a lecture delivered by a British pro-Putin and pro-Assad activist Vanessa Beeley at the Uppsala University’s International Summer School in 2018.¹⁶ **Simons** is also a member of the pro-Kremlin and pro-Assad Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media.¹⁷

16 “Top University’s Course Turns out to be Propaganda”, *Postimees*, 28 June (2018), <https://news.postimees.ee/4511277/top-university-s-course-turns-out-to-be-propaganda>.

17 “Members”, *Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media*, <http://syriapropagandamedia.org/about/members>.

“International experts” and electoral officials as instruments of pro-Kremlin propaganda

As stated above, on 22 August 2019, the CEC refused to even potentially consider inviting OSCE observers to monitor the regional elections, and none of the “international experts” or electoral officials who participated in the conference “Digitalisation of Electoral Processes” were officially registered as international observers. However, in their reports covering the regional elections, Russian pro-Kremlin media, including major outlets such as *Rossiia segodnya*, *Vesti*, and *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, often used the terms “international experts” and “foreign [or international] observers” interchangeably, which created an impression that they were indeed official international observers. A subtitle to one news piece in *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* even read “Some foreign observers are accredited for the elections in Moscow not for the first time”,¹⁸ and thus directly contradicted the information from the CEC. Some “international experts”, for example Gregory Simons,¹⁹ referred to themselves as “international observers” on their social networks too.

In general, Russian media reported on the positive impressions of “international experts” regarding the “technological innovations” in the voting processes in Russia. Véronique Rouez was glad to see that “most of the people who had

18 <https://www.msk.kp.ru/online/news/3599527/>

19 Greg Simons, “Doing my rounds of polling stations in the city of Tula (Russia) during the regional elections today as an international observer”, *Facebook*, 8 September (2019), <https://www.facebook.com/greg.simons.75/posts/10156551757496914>.



“International experts” at the press conference hosted by Igor Borisov (second from the left), head of the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law

Source: <https://riafan.ru/1210765-nablyudateli-iz-evropy-pozavidovali-vysokim-tehnologiyam-na-vyborakh-v-rf>

applied for an electronic vote took this opportunity”.²⁰ Emmanuel Leroy considered the process of electronic voting “transparent” and complained that, in France, “things were not going so well”.²¹ Leroy was not the only “international expert” who drew parallels between elections in Russia and their own country: Sämi Meier “was favourably impressed by the level of technological development” of the voting process, adding that he thought that the technologies used in Russia were better than in his home country Switzerland.²² Alberto Bianco compared the Russian elections of 2018 and 2019, saying that the voting process “underwent qualitative changes related to technologies”.²³ Aymeri de Montesquiou-Fezensac d’Artagnan noted that “Russia’s aspiration to modernise the voting system” arrested his attention.²⁴

20 Alena Pinaeva, “Chuvstvuem zdes’ demokratiyu’. Inostrannye nablyudateli – o vyborakh v Mosgordumu”, 360 TV, 9 September (2019), <https://360tv.ru/news/tekst/inostrannye-nablyudateli-mosgorduma/>.

21 Ibid.

22 “Nablyudateli iz Evropy pozavidovali vysokim tehnologiyam na vyborakh v RF”, *Federal’noe agentstvo novostey*, 9 September (2019), <https://riafan.ru/1210765-nablyudateli-iz-evropy-pozavidovali-vysokim-tehnologiyam-na-vyborakh-v-rf>.

23 Pinaeva, “Chuvstvuem zdes’ demokratiyu”.

24 “Nablyudateli iz Evropy pozavidovali vysokim tehnologiyam na vyborakh v RF”.

Some foreign electoral officials and “international experts” invited by the CEC to the conference “Digitalisation of Electoral Processes” made similar remarks to the Russian media, which possibly implies that this was one of the media’s main foci when interviewing foreigners attending the Public Headquarters for Control and Observation of the Elections to the Moscow City Duma, the CEC’s Information Centre, or polling stations. Esthela Acero, a member of the National Electoral Council of the Republic of Ecuador, said that she saw how Russian technologies provided for the “absolute transparency of the elections”.²⁵ Khaled Al-Kalaldeh, chairman of Jordan’s Independent Election Commission, was impressed by “the level of technologies used by the [Russian] electoral commission”.²⁶ Angela Kane, Senior Fellow at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, said that the electoral process was well organised and that the “operational system of electronic voting was a big step forward”.²⁷

Apart from voicing foreigners’ apparent fascination with the Russian “technological innovations”, Russian officials used “international experts” to further a conspiracy theory that the West tried to meddle in the Russian regional elections.²⁸ With this objective in view, several “international experts” were introduced on 6 September (i.e. two days before the voting day) to Andrey Klimov, the deputy chair for foreign affairs of the Federation Council and one of the ardent advocates of the above-mentioned conspiracy theory. In order to demonstrate the alleged foreign interference in the Russian regional elections, Klimov showed the “international experts” two printed copies of articles published by the Russian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). One article was a summary of a discussion held by three Russian political commentators on the electoral strategies of the Russian opposition.²⁹ The second article featured a

25 Pinaeva, “Chuvstvuem zdes’ demokratiyu”.

26 “Inostrannye eksperty podtverdili, chto vybory v Moskve proshli prozrachno”, *RIAMO*, 9 September (2019), <https://riamo.ru/article/380163/inostrannye-eksperty-podtverdili-cto-vybory-v-moskve-proshli-prozrachno.xl>

27 Sergey Chaev, “Mosgorduma stala bolee raznoplanovoy”, *Moskovskaya perspektiva*, 10 September (2019), <https://mperspektiva.ru/topics/mosgorduma-stala-bolee-raznoplanovoy/>.

28 See Evan Gershkovich, *The Kremlin Sees Signs of Foreign Interference All Around*, *The Moscow Times*, 14 August (2019), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/14/the-kremlin-sees-signs-of-foreign-interference-all-around-a66839>; Jake Rudnitsky, *Russian Lawmakers Look for Foreign Hand behind Wave of Protests*, *Bloomberg*, 19 August (2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-19/russian-lawmakers-to-probe-foreign-meddling-amid-protest-wave>; Naira Davlashyan, *Russian MPs to Investigate Foreign Interference in Its Internal Affairs*, *Euronews*, 23 August (2019), <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/23/russian-mps-to-investigate-foreign-interference-in-its-internal-affairs>.

29 Mikhail Sokolov, “Kak preodolet’ putinizm”, *Radio Svoboda*, 5 September (2019), <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30148020.html>.



Andrey Klimov (right), deputy chair for foreign affairs of Russia’s Federation Council, tells “international experts” about the alleged Western interference in the Russian regional elections

Source: <http://council.gov.ru/events/news/107615/>

quotation in its title: “You will be duped anyway”,³⁰ and Klimov presented it in such a way to suggest that the article discouraged people from voting. In fact, the latter article, written by a Russia-based journalist, reported on Internet trolls who did discourage people from participating in the elections, but the article itself was critical, rather than supportive, of the trolls’ activities. Nevertheless, Klimov stressed that both articles were evidence of foreign meddling in the elections because they were published by RFE/RL, which is funded by the US government.

At a press conference featuring four “international experts” held on 9 September,³¹ it became obvious that the meeting with Klimov was crucial for promoting the conspiracy theory about Western interference. The press conference was

30 Ekaterina Vasyukova, “‘Vas obmanut vsyo ravno...!’ Zachem internet-trolli ubezhdayut izbirateley ne khodit’ na vybory?”, *Sibir’.Realii*, 4 September (2019), <https://www.sibreal.org/a/30138361.html>.

31 “Itogi raboty zarubezhnykh ekspertov po rezul’tatam nablyudeniya za vyborami v Rossii”, *Rossiya segodnya*, 9 September (2019), <http://pressmia.ru/pressclub/20190909/952467883.html>.

opened by a statement from Igor Borisov, who raised the issue of “uncontrolled external foreign meddling in the nationwide elections” and “fake news” about the elections, as well as the alleged encouragement of “international experts” to talk about these “problems” in their reports. Indeed, when Sāmi Meier read his report, he argued that the context of the 2019 election campaign was characterised by external pressure, attempts to meddle in the elections, and public calls to go beyond the legal procedures, while Véronique Rouez talked about the necessity to fight against fake news about the elections. However, when an RT journalist asked the panel to give examples of foreign interference, Borisov took the floor again and said that the “international experts” had learnt about foreign interference from a meeting with the members of the Federation Council – most likely referring to the meeting with Klimov. This implies that Russian officials sold the “international experts” a preconceived narrative about “foreign interference” and the latter packaged this narrative as a result of their own observation in order to lend credence to the pro-Kremlin and anti-Western conspiracy theory.

Conclusion

Neither Russian state authorities nor the Central Election Committee (CEC) invited any representatives of the established monitoring organisations to monitor the Russian 2019 regional elections, despite the appeal of the registered candidates to Secretary General of the OSCE Thomas Greminger, Director of the OSCE ODIHR Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, and President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly George Tsereteli to send international observers. However, as the refusal of the Moscow City Election Commission to register the overwhelming majority of independent opposition candidates provoked mass protests and undermined the legitimacy of the elections to the Moscow City Duma, Russian state institutions and pro-regime organisations felt the need to neutralise these negative effects with the help of a two-pronged strategy.

First, the Russian Public Institute of Electoral Law (RPIEL), headed by Igor Borisov, invited – in cooperation with the CEC and Russia’s Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights – around 16 foreign individuals to observe the elections in the capacity of “international experts”. The majority of these “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 to the 2011 Russian parliamentary elections, 2012 Ukrainian parliamentary elections, 2012 Russian presidential elections, 2017 and 2018 Russian regional elections, and 2018 Russian presidential election;
- attempting to legitimise the illegitimate electoral processes in Transnistria (2007) and Crimea (the “referendum” of 2014 and the Russian “presidential election” of 2018);
- illegally visiting Russia-annexed Crimea and Russia-occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine, or providing support to the Russia-backed separatist “Donetsk

People's Republic", thus justifying Russia's actions directed at undermining Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity;

- regularly providing pro-Kremlin comments to Russian state-controlled media (RT, Voice of Russia, Sputnik);
- organising events aimed at amplifying pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Second, the CEC invited dozens of heads of national election management bodies, senior officials from international organisations, and "international experts" to participate in the conference "Digitalisation of Electoral Processes. Humanitarian Dimension", scheduled to take place during the voting day. Some of the conference participants were taken to the Public Headquarters for Control and Observation of the Elections to the Moscow City Duma and the CEC's Information Centre, and thus were exposed to the Russian pro-Kremlin media.

Despite the fact that foreign individuals who attended the elections as conference participants or "international experts" had not been accredited by the CEC as official election observers, Russian pro-regime media often referred to them as *observers* and stated that they had *observed* the elections. These discursive tactics were aimed at (1) providing international legitimacy of the elections with the Russian audience as the main addressee, (2) boosting the image of Russia as a world leader of election-related "technological innovations", and (3) promoting the allegedly positive image of Russia on the international stage by using the invited international experts as potential agents of the Kremlin's influence in Europe. Russian officials also used the "international experts" invited by the RPIEL to promote a conspiracy theory that Western institutions tried to interfere in the Russian regional elections.



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