

CONTROVERSIAL
“INTERNATIONAL
OBSERVATION” OF THE
“All-Russian Voting”
on Amendments to
the Constitution in
Russia and Russia-
Annexed Crimea

Anton
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Executive summary

In order to have a possibility to stay in power until 2036, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided, in January 2020, to change the Constitution of the Russian Federation and legitimise its change through the “all-Russian voting”. A new legal framework for the vote was created, which became officially known as “the all-Russian voting on amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation”.

The vote was initially planned for 22 April 2020, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was postponed to 1 July; however, Russian voters were allowed to vote in the period between 25 June and 1 Jul 2020.

Russia’s Central Election Committee did not invite any official international observers from established organisations such as the OSCE ODIHR or PACE, because international observation is envisioned only by Russian federal laws on parliamentary and presidential elections, while international observation was not included in the legal framework of the “all-Russian voting”. However, as the Russian authority had done before, they invited – through the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation – 75 foreign individuals who would officially be called “international experts” and be ready to praise any electoral process in Russia as democratic, open, free and fair.

Russian authorities never published a list of the “international experts” they invited to “observe” the voting process, but we have identified 52 such individuals using OSINT methods. The majority of the identified “international experts” have a record of previous direct and indirect involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts, including, but not limited to:

- previous participation in politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions in Russia and elsewhere;
- legitimisation and justification of the actions of the Russian Federation directed at undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity;

- legitimisation of the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories known as South Ossetia and Abkhazia;
- cooperation with Russian state-controlled instruments of disinformation and propaganda (RT and Sputnik); and
- membership in organisations advancing the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy interests.

As they were invited effectively to endorse the “all-Russian voting”, these “international experts” actively and eagerly commented on the voting process to the Russian media. Six sometimes overlapping lines of argument can be identified in their comments:

- general praise of the conduct of the “all-Russian voting”;
- praise for Russian technological innovations in the electoral process;
- focus on the safety issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- positive comparison of the Russian elections to other electoral processes;
- criticism of allegedly negative Western attitudes towards the “all-Russian voting”; and
- attempts to legitimise the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Introduction

During his address to the Federal Assembly on 15 January 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a number of amendments¹ to the Russian constitution that would, in particular, allow him to run for another two terms and to stay in power until 2036.² At the same time, Putin suggested holding “a vote of Russian citizens on the entire package of the proposed amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation”, adding that “the final decision must be made only on the basis of its results”.³

Experts claimed that the suggested vote would not be held in accordance with the Federal Constitutional Law on the Referendum, and did not have “any constitutional status, legal form or procedure” at all.⁴ A new legal framework for the vote was created, which became officially known as “the all-Russian voting on amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation”. As Alena Epifanova argued, the new legal framework “was created hurriedly”; it lacked “detailed regulations for campaigning, preparation, voting, and vote counting. The whole framework and procedure of the vote [was] set up in a way which [made] it rather a symbolic act of approval of the president’s changes than a real decision of the people”.⁵

Initially, the vote was planned for 22 April 2020,⁶ but due to the dramatic situation with the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia, the vote was postponed to 1 July

- 1 “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”, *President of Russia*, 15 January (2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.
- 2 “Law on Amendment to Russian Federation Constitution”, *President of Russia*, 14 March (2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/62988>.
- 3 “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”.
- 4 Alena Epifanova, “Policy Alert #4 – How Corona Thwarts Putin’s Plan to Change the Constitution”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 8 April (2020), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/policy-alert-4-the-interrupted-script-how-corona-thwarts-putins-plan-to-change-the-constitution.html>
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 “April 22 – The Vote on Amendments to the Constitution”, *President of Russia*, 17 March (2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63003>.



French far-right MEP Jean-Lin Lacapelle

Source: <https://twitter.com/jllacapelle/status/1278273463950737411>

2020.⁷ Because of the ongoing pandemic in the country, Russian authorities decided to hold the vote in the period of several days, from 25 June until 1 July 2020.

Already in February 2020, the chair of Russia's Central Election Committee (CEC) Ella Pamfilova declared that her office would not invite international observers to monitor the vote on the constitutional amendments because inviting them was not envisaged by the legislation in force.⁸ On 16 June, the CEC's secretary Maya Grishina repeated that there would be no international observation at the "all-Russian voting".⁹ Indeed, only Russian federal laws on parliamentary and presidential elections mention and define international observation, which

7 "Executive Order Setting Date for National Vote on Russian Federation Constitutional Amendments", *President of Russia*, 1 June (2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63443>.

8 "Na golosovanie po popravkam v Konstitutsiyu ne priglasyat mezhdunarodnykh nablyudateley", *Interfax*, 13 February (2020), <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/695261>.

9 "TsIK ne budet priglasht' mezhdunarodnykh nablyudateley na golosovanie po konstitutsii", *TASS*, 16 June (2020), <https://tass.ru/politika/8734377>.



“International experts” Srđan Perišić, Nikola Nešić, Valentina Kecman

Source: <https://www.rsmoscowoffice.ru/novosti/predstaviteli-respubliki-serbskoj-sredi-mezhdunarodnyx-nablyudatelej-v-rossii>

means that there is legal framework for international monitoring of presidential and parliamentary elections.

For other elections and plebiscites, Russian authorities tend to invite friendly foreign politicians, journalists and lobbyists who are always ready to praise any electoral process in Russia as democratic, open, free and fair. Due to the CEC’s position on international observation of Russian elections other than presidential or parliamentary, these friendly foreign individuals are not officially referred to as “international observers”; rather, they are called “international experts”. Nevertheless, while reporting on these “experts” and their praise of the “all-Russian voting”, Russian media, including those controlled by the state, often used the term “observers”, thus creating a false impression of the developments around the plebiscite.¹⁰

10 See, for example, “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli otmetili unikal’nost’ organizatsii golosovaniya RF v pandemiyu”, TASS, 27 June (2020), <https://tass.ru/politika/8832081>; Sofiya Alabina, “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli – o golosovanii po popravkam: Narusheniy ne zametili”, LIFE, 3 July (2020), <https://life.ru/p/1332621>; “Nablyudatel’ iz Italii otsenil uroven’ organizatsii golosovaniya v Moskve”, RIA Novosti, 2 July (2020), <https://ria.ru/20200702/1573777788.html>.

Commenting on the vote, the EU's Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Peter Stano said that the EU regretted that "in the run up to this vote, campaigning both for and against [had not been] allowed, thereby denying voters access to balanced information". He added that the EU expected "all reports and allegations of irregularities, including voter coercion, multiple voting, violation of secrecy of the vote and allegations of police violence against a journalist who [had been] present to observe, to be duly investigated".¹¹

11 "Russia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Nationwide Voting on Constitutional Amendments", *European Union External Action*, 2 July (2020), https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/81978/russia-statement-spokesperson-nationwide-voting-constitutional-amendments_en.

“International observation”

Normally, in the case of Russian presidential and parliamentary elections, international observers are officially invited by the Russian State Duma,¹² while in the case of elections below the federal level, “international experts” are invited by Russia’s Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights.¹³ However, it was the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation (CCRF) that – with the help of “non-governmental organisations”¹⁴ – invited foreign individuals to monitor the “all-Russian voting”. Moreover, according to documents obtained by the EPDE, invitation letters signed by the CCRF’s secretary Lidiya Mikheeva explicitly mentioned *observation* of the vote, despite the CEC’s statements that there would be no international observation at the “all-Russian voting”. For example, an invitation letter sent by the CCRF to one European politician featured the following phrase: “Attaching great importance to ensuring the most open and transparent All-Russian vote, we would like to invite You to participate in *observing the voting process* on 25 June – 1 July 2020” (italics added). Nevertheless, official badges distributed to the “observers” featured the title “international expert”.

The overwhelming majority of “international experts” arrived in Moscow in three groups: the first arrived on 24 June, the second and the third on 29 June. Yet another group of “international experts” was formed by those foreign

- 12 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018), https://www.epde.org/en/documents/documentsarchiv/category/russia.html?year=2018&file=files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2018%20Russian%20Elections/_Anton%20Shekhovtsov%20-%20Politically%20Biased%20Foreign%20Electoral%20Observation%20at%20the%20Russian%202018%20Presidential%20Election_fin.pdf.
- 13 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Controversial ‘International Observation’ at the 2019 Regional Elections in Russia”, European Platform for Democratic Elections, 8 October (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/controversial-international-observation-at-the-2019-regional-elections-in-russia.html>.
- 14 Elizaveta Fokht, “Druz’ya Putina’ i ul’ttraprave. Kakikh inostrantsev Rossiya priglasila nabluidat’ za golosovaniem”, *BBC*, 1 July (2020), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-53242482>.

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Member of the European Parliament, President
of the Franco-Russian Dialogue Association,
former French Minister of Transport, Former
member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
and PACE, honorary Member of Parliament

Thierry Mariani

Dear Mr. Thierry Mariani!

On 1 June 2020 the Russian Federation will hold an All-Russian vote, during which the citizens of the country will express their opinion on whether they approve of a number of amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

The amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation include a range of social guarantees for the citizens, as well as support for the most important institutions (family, civic society, etc.). They also introduce improvements to the public administration system in the Russian Federation.

It depends on the results of the All-Russian vote whether the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation will enter into force.

At the same time, in order to avoid the risk of spreading the new coronavirus infection COVID-19 and to provide safe conditions for people's health, it was decided that the citizens will be able to vote not only on 1 June 2020, but also during a few days before that date, namely from June 25 to June 30 2020.

Attaching great importance to ensuring the most open and transparent All-Russian vote, we would like to invite You to participate in observing the voting process on 25 June – 1 July 2020.

Lidiya Mikheeva

**An invitation to French
far-right MEP Thierry
Mariani to observe the
“all-Russian voting”**

individuals who were based in Russia – either as diplomats working in foreign embassies or as representatives of business companies or social organisations.

During their voting-related activities in Russia, “experts” were engaged in meeting with Russian officials, visiting polling stations to “observe” the voting, providing commentary on their “observations” to the Russian media, and sightseeing. In particular, “international experts” met with Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Slutsky. The latter was involved in organising politically biased international observation of the Russian elections in previous years with the help of his Russian Peace Foundation (RPF),¹⁵ so it

15 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Election Observation – A Threat to the Integrity of International Institutions”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 14 January (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-election-observation-a-threat-to-the-integrity-of-international-institutions.html>.

seems viable to suggest that Slutsky also played an important role in bringing “international experts” to monitor the “all-Russian voting”.

According to the CCRF’s member Maria Butina, the CCRF invited 75 “international experts” from 33 countries,¹⁶ but no Russian institution has ever published the full list of these “experts”. Using OSINT methods, we have identified 52 such individuals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Identified “international experts” invited to observe the “all-Russian voting” on amendments to the Constitution in Russia and Russia-annexed Crimea (marked with *)

Country	Name	Political affiliation/place of work
Afghanistan	Yasar Ahmadzai	CEO and Founder of Afghanistan Institute of Peace
Afghanistan	Mokhammad Tamim Ekhlas	Head of the Afghan Youth Development Association
Afghanistan	Bashir Hatif	Zhwandoon TV
Afghanistan	Ahmad Hewad Rahyab	Deputy Country Director at Global Youth Parliament
Armenia	Rafael Unanyan	Chairman of the Youth Parliament of Armenia
Belarus	Alexey Dzermant	IMHOclub.by (website)
Belarus	Sergey Lushch	“Young Rus” association
Belarus	Alexander Shpakovsky	Director of the “Current Concept” think-tank
Benin	Smaila Raoufou Mousse	Embassy of Benin in Russia
Brazil	Jader Rieffe Julianelli Afonso	Executive Secretary of the Interstate Consortium for the Development of Central Brazil
Bulgaria	Lyubomira Gancheva*	Party “Alternative for Bulgarian Revival”
Bulgaria	Martin Raychev*	*unknown
Chile	Bruno Sommer Catalán	Founder of <i>El Ciudadano</i> (magazine)
Ethiopia	Angessa Duga Challa	Embassy of Zambia in Russia
Finland	Johan Bäckman	*unknown
France	Jeanine Arnoldy-Sich	Russian Foundation “Capital of Mercy”
France	Aurélia Beigneux	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Catherine Griset	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Virginie Joron*	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Hervé Juvin*	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Dimitri de Kochko	*unknown
France	Jean-Lin Lacapelle*	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)

16 “Kak golosovanie po popravkam k Kantsitsutsii otsenili mezhdunarodnye eksperty?”, *Regnum*, 3 July (2020), <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3000963.html>.

Country	Name	Political affiliation/place of work
France	Hélène Laporte	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Julie Lechanteux	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Thierry Mariani*	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Philippe Olivier*	MEP, National Rally (Rassemblement national)
France	Alexis Parmentier	Consultant at Acteon LLC
France	Alexis Tarrade	President of the Russian Delegation of the Union of the French Abroad
Germany	Gunnar Norbert Lindemann*	Member of the Berlin State Parliament, Alternative for Germany (AfD)
Germany	Stefan Keuter	Member of the Bundestag, Alternative for Germany (AfD)
Germany	Alexander Rahr	Advisor on EU affairs for Gazprom
Germany	Volker Tschapke	Honorary president of the Prussian Society Berlin-Brandenburg e.V.
Greece	Dimitris Liatsos	Sputnik (website)
Hungary	László Kemény	*unknown
Italy	Federico Arena	Councillor at the Municipality of Monza, Northern League (Lega Nord)
Italy	Andrea Giannotti	Executive Director of the Institute of Eurasian Studies
Italy	Paolo Grimoldi	Northern League (Lega Nord)
Latvia	Jevgenijs Korols	Co-chair of the "Action" (Rīcības partija) party
Latvia	Einārs Graudiņš	"Action" (Rīcības partija)
Montenegro	Igor Damjanović	IN4S (website)
Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Srdan Perišić	University of East Sarajevo
Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Vanja Savićević	Vostok (website)
Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Danijel Simić	Head of the Association of Journalists of Republika Srpska
Serbia	Valentina Kecman	Chair of the council on international affairs of the "United Serbia" party
Serbia	Nikola Nešić	President of the "New Force" (Nova Snaga) party
Serbia	Slobodan Stojićević	*unknown
Serbia	Draginja Vlk	Member of the City Assembly of Belgrade, Serbian Progressive Party
Spain	Pedro Mouriño	CEO IberAtlantic Global Corporation



French far-right MEPs in Russia-annexed Crimea

Source: <https://rg.ru/2020/07/02/reg-ufo/francuzskij-deputat-v-krymu-prizval-evrosoiuz-sniat-sankcii-s-rossii.html>

Country	Name	Political affiliation/place of work
Sweden	Erik Almqvist*	*unknown
Sweden	Vávra Suk	<i>Nye Tider</i> (magazine)
Venezuela	Janlisbert Velasco	President of the Mission Sucre
*unknown	Bashir Abbas Samaha	Consultant of the Association of Arab Universities and Russian Universities

As seen from Table 1, the largest delegation of “international experts” who “observed” the “all-Russian voting” was represented by French MEPs from the far-right National Rally (Rassemblement national) party led by Marine Le Pen and previously known as the “National Front”. The French MEPs’ visit to Russia and annexed Crimea had nothing to do with the European Parliament. In their statement, co-chairs of the European Parliament’s Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group, David McAllister and Tomas Tobé, declared that “no individual Member of the European Parliament ha[d] been mandated to observe or comment on this electoral process on its behalf”, and that “any Member of the European Parliament who [had] decided to observe this electoral

process in the Russian Federation, or in the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula, [...] ha[d] done so on her/his own initiative and should under no circumstances through any statement or action, associate her/his participation with the European Parliament”.¹⁷ The delegation of nine French far-right MEPs was brought to “observe” the “all-Russian voting” by Thierry Mariani, a politician with a long record of various pro-Kremlin efforts.¹⁸

17 David McAllister, Tomas Tobé, “The European Parliament Does not Observe the Constitutional Referendum in Russia”, *European Parliament*, 1 July (2020), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200701IPR82409/the-european-parliament-does-not-observe-the-constitutional-referendum-in-russia>.

18 Anna Stroganova, “Devyat’ evrodeputatov iz partii Le Pen: kto priekhal nablyudat’ za golosovaniem po popravkam k Kointsitsii”, *RFI*, 3 July (2020), <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/россия/20200703-девять-евродепутатов-из-партии-ле-пен-кто-приехал-наблюдать-за-голосованием-по-поправкам-к-конституции>.

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

Commenting on foreign individuals invited to “observe” the voting process, Maksim Grigoryev, the head of the CCRF’s working group on the civic control of elections, said that the CCRF chose them “on the basis of their independence, professionalism, [and] credibility”.¹⁹

However, our research shows that the main principle that guided the CCRF in its choice of “observers” seemed to be not their independence, professionalism or credibility, but rather their readiness to endorse the “all-Russian voting” independently of how it was carried out. The majority of the identified “international experts” have a record of previous direct and indirect 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) legitimisation of the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories known as South Ossetia and Abkhazia; (4) cooperation with Russian state-controlled instruments of disinformation and propaganda (RT and Sputnik); and (5) membership in organisations advancing the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy interests.

19 Fokht, “Druz’ya Putina’ i ul’ttraprave”.

Mokhammad Tamim Ekhlās, Dimitris Liatsos and **Johan Bäckman** “observed” the illegitimate Russian presidential election in annexed Crimea in 2018. **Liatsos** is a regular contributor to the Greek edition of the Russian state-funded Sputnik website that promotes the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests. **Bäckman** is a long-time pro-Kremlin political activist who was involved in a number of pro-Kremlin activities. In March 2014, he “observed” the “referendum” in Crimea that was followed by the annexation of this Ukrainian republic by Russia. In May 2014, **Bäckman** declared himself a representative of the separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) in Finland. He frequently travelled to the DPR and “observed” its so-called primary regional elections in 2016 and the “general elections” in 2018. In October 2018, **Bäckman** received a 12-month suspended jail sentence for aggravated defamation and stalking of Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, who investigated pro-Kremlin Internet trolls. In 2019, he also “observed” the illegitimate parliamentary elections in the unrecognised Republic of South Ossetia, occupied by Russia.

Alexey Dzermant and **Alexander Shpakovsky** are regular contributors to the Belarusian edition of the Russian state-funded Sputnik website.

Sergey Lushch is a chairman of the Belarusian anti-Western and pro-Kremlin organization “Young Rus”, which promotes ideas of Slavic brotherhood and the union of Belarus and Russia.

A member of the Bulgarian centre-left party “Alternative for Bulgarian Revival”, **Lyubomira Gancheva** illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea in 2019 to take part in the Yalta International Economic Forum. During her address there, she stated that, if elected to the European parliament, her party would oppose the “anti-Russian sanctions”.²⁰

Aurélia Beigneux, Catherine Griset, Virginie Joron, Hervé Juvin, Jean-Lin Lacapelle, Hélène Laporte, Julie Lechanteux, Thierry Mariani, and **Philippe Olivier** are MEPs representing the French far-right National Rally, known for its pro-Kremlin orientations. **Mariani** is the co-president of the openly pro-Kremlin French-Russian Dialogue Association, one of whose members is Leonid Slutsky. In April 2015, Slutsky brought **Mariani** to Moscow, where the latter declared that the “anti-Russian” sanctions had to be lifted. In July 2015, **Mariani** illegally travelled to Crimea as part of a delegation of French politicians. Both of his trips (to Russia and Crimea) were funded by Slutsky’s RPF. In December 2015, **Mariani** led a delegation of 17 French politicians to Moscow, also upon invitation from the RPF. He was part of the politically biased election observation missions at the 2017 Russian regional elections and 2018

20 “V Bolgarii poobeshchali vystupit’ protiv antirossiyskikh sanktsiy v EP”, *RIA Novosti*, 20 April (2019), <https://ria.ru/20190420/1552881480.html>.



French far-right MEP Virginie Joron

Source: https://twitter.com/v_joron/status/1278371336050671617

presidential election. Moreover, he “observed” the illegitimate 2018 “general elections” in the DPR.

French journalist **Dimitri de Kochko** is a co-founder of the Union of Rus-sophones of France and a regular commentator for the French edition of the Russian state-controlled Sputnik website. He is a member of the community board of the Public Diplomacy project, chaired by Aleksey Kochetkov, one of the main Russian organisers of politically biased election observation missions. **De Kochko** was a member of politically biased observation missions at the 2017 Russian regional elections and 2018 presidential election.

Alexis Tarrade is a former member of the centre-right Republicans party and a commentator for the Russian state-controlled Sputnik website. In 2018, as part of the delegation led by Thierry Mariani, **Tarrade** illegally visited Eastern Ukraine to “observe” the illegitimate “general elections” in the DPR.



German far-right politician Gunnar Norbert Lindemann and Bulgarian politician Lyubomira Gancheva in Russia-annexed Crimea

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/gunnarnorbert.lindemann/>

Gunnar Norbert Lindemann and **Stefan Keuter** are members of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), known for its pro-Kremlin orientation. In February 2018, **Lindemann**, together with several other members of the AfD, illegally travelled to Crimea, and in April that year participated in the Yalta International Economic Forum, held in Russia-annexed Crimea. The same year, **Lindemann** “observed” the illegitimate “general elections” in the DPR. In 2019, both **Lindemann** and **Keuter** “observed” the first round of the “presidential elections” in Russia-occupied Abkhazia. Since 2019, **Keuter** has also been cooperating with AFRIC, a Russian network of agents of influence created by political consultants working for Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a Russian businessman close to Vladimir Putin.²¹

21 See Anton Shekhovtsov, “Fake Election Observation as Russia’s Tool of Election Interference: The Case of AFRIC” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2020), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/fake-election-observation-as-russias-tool-of-election-interference-the-case-of-afric.html>.



Italian far-right “international expert” Paolo Grimoldi

Source: <https://www.oprf.ru/ru/press/news/2617/newsitem/53901>

Alexander Rahr is a research director of the German-Russian Forum, a deputy chair of the Council of Russian Economy in Germany, and an advisor on EU affairs for the Russian energy giant Gazprom; **Rahr** has been promoting the Kremlin’s politics and economic interest in Germany for years.

German far-right activist **Volker Tschapke** has been cooperating with Prigozhin’s AFRIC since 2018, and took part in several politically biased election observation missions organised by AFRIC in Africa.

Federico Arena and **Paolo Grimoldi** are members of the Italian far-right Northern League (or simply League) party, known for its pro-Kremlin positions. In 2014, **Grimoldi** initiated the creation of the cross-party group “Friends of Putin” in the Italian parliament.

Andrea Giannotti is Executive Director and Vice President of the Institute of Eurasian Studies, which promotes Russian foreign policy interests in Italy, and a member of the pro-Kremlin Gorchakov Club.

Jevgenijs Korols and **Einārs Graudiņš** are leaders of the Latvian anti-immigrant and openly pro-Russian party “Action”, chaired by the head of the “Russian World of Latvia” organisation.²²

Igor Damjanović is a pro-Russian and anti-NATO activist and journalist writing for the Montenegrin IN4S website. He is also a regular commentator for Russian “state- and church-aligned media”.²³

Pedro Mouriño participated in several politically biased election observation missions. Together with Johan Bäckman, he “observed” the “referendum” in Crimea that was followed by the annexation of this Ukrainian republic by Russia in March 2014. **Mouriño** “observed” the 2018 Russian presidential election, as well as Russian regional elections on the single voting day in 2018 and 2019. He is also a regular commentator for Russian state-funded RT channel.

Editor of the Swedish far-right magazine *Nye Tider*, **Vávra Suk** has been cooperating with Prigozhin’s AFRIC since 2018, and was part of the politically biased election observation mission at the 2018 Russian presidential election.

22 Edvard Chesnokov, “V Latvii poyavilas’ partiya, vystupayushchaya protiv migrantov i antirossiyskikh sanktsiy”, *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 15 September (2019), <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27029.5/4093027/>.

23 Julia Petrovskaya, “Moscow’s Fight against the ‘Enemies of Orthodoxy’ in the Balkans”, *Riddle*, 6 March (2020), <https://www.ridl.io/en/moscow-s-fight-against-the-enemies-of-orthodoxy-in-the-balkans/>.

Praising the “all-Russian voting”

As demonstrated in the previous section, the majority of the identified “international experts” who were invited to observe the “all-Russian voting” were far from independent and credible (as the CCRF referred to them), as they had been directly or indirectly involved in efforts to advance the Kremlin’s domestic and/or foreign policy interests. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that these “international experts” should have expressed enthusiastic praise of the “all-Russian voting”.

According to the Russian government agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today, not to be confused with RT), “international experts” provided a report on their work that read: “On the basis of the results of our expert and observation mission, we can declare that we witnessed the electoral procedure, which met the norms effective in our respective countries and allowed citizens to freely fulfil their civic duty”.²⁴

The comments that the “international experts” provided to the Russian media can be broken down into six categories: (1) general positive assessment of the conduct of the “all-Russian voting”, (2) praise for Russian technological innovations in the electoral process, (3) focus on the safety issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, (4) positive comparison of the Russian elections to other electoral processes, (5) criticism of allegedly negative Western attitudes towards the “all-Russian voting”, and (6) attempts to legitimise the Russian annexation of Crimea.

According to Italian far-right politician Federico Arena, the fact that Russians had several days to take part in the voting was one of the advantages of the process.²⁵ Andrea Giannotti commended what he considered as transparency of the process and assured that “all voters were secured a right to voice their

24 “Mezhdunarodnye eksperty otsenili golosovanie po popravkam v Moskve”, *RIA Novosti*, 6 July (2020), <https://ria.ru/20200706/1573972523.html>.

25 Alabina, “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli – o golosovanii po popravkam”.



French far-right MEP Julie Lechanteux giving an interview to the Russian TV, with Johan Bäckman in the background

Source: <https://twitter.com/JLechanteux/status/1278742034141057024>

opinion”.²⁶ Another Italian far-right politician, Paolo Grimoldi, speaking at a briefing organised by the CCRF, said he was satisfied with the manner the voting process had been organised.²⁷

Mokhammad Tamim Ekhlas said that he visited many polling stations in Moscow and found that the majority of the voters preferred electronic voting. Ekhlas also stressed that the technologies used in Moscow might “become a good example for many countries”.²⁸ In his turn, Pedro Mouriño – commenting on the technological innovations in the Russian elections – said that the

26 Anton Antonov, “Ekspert iz Finlyandii obvinil zarubezhnye SMI vo lzhi o golosovanii v Rossii”, *Vzglyad*, 1 July (2020), <https://vz.ru/news/2020/7/1/1047932.html>.

27 “Ital’yanskiy deputat otsenil khod golosovaniya popravkam v Rossi”, *RIA Novosti*, 26 June (2020), <https://ria.ru/20200626/1573533471.html>.

28 Angelina Zelen’kova, “Mezhdunarodnye eksperty vysoko otsenili elektronnoe golosovanie v Moskve”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 30 June (2020), <https://rg.ru/2020/06/30/reg-cfo/mezhdunarodnye-eksperty-vysoko-ocenili-elektronnoe-golosovanie-v-moskve.html>.



German far-right MP Stefan Keuter incorrectly captioned as an “observer” on the Russian state-controlled “Pervy kanal” TV channel: “My personal view is that the level of organisation in Russia is higher even than in Germany”

Source: Pervy kanal

introduction of modern voting technologies was “a positive phenomenon and an indispensable part of progress of Russian political life”.²⁹

French far-right MEP Julie Lechanteux admitted that she was fascinated by the conditions created for the voting process against the background of the pandemic. She said that the process was very well organised and that the organisers made arrangements for sanitary safety. Lechanteux also expressed her hope that “Paris could learn from the Russian experience of conducting elections in a difficult situation”.³⁰ German far-right member of the Berlin State Parliament Gunnar Norbert Lindemann noted that everybody who wanted to vote was provided with personal protective equipment in order not to compromise their health.³¹ Grimoldi said that everything was very well organised, especially considering the coronavirus pandemic.³²

29 Ibid.

30 Alabina, “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli – o golosovanii po popravkam”.

31 “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli otmetili unikal’nost”.

32 “Informatsionny tsentr TsIK rabotaet vo vse dni golosovaniya i otkryt dlya zhurnalistov”, *Pervy kanal*, 25 June (2020), https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-06-25/388338-informatsionny_tsentr_tsik_rabotaet_vo_vse_dni_golosovaniya_i_otkryt_dlya_zhurnalistov.

German far-right MP Stefan Keuter declared that the quality level of the conduct of elections was higher in Russia than in Germany, specifically noting the polling stations equipped with surveillance cameras, which Germany apparently lacks.³³ Latvian pro-Russian politician Jevgenijs Korols compared his “monitoring” experience in Russia with that at the elections to the European Parliament, and could not find any violations, even though he “judged sternly”.³⁴ Grimoldi, who claimed to chair the Italian delegation to the OSCE, said that he could compare the elections in Russia to those in Azerbaijan, Moldova, USA, Ukraine, Georgia and other countries, and that he was confident that the “all-Russian voting” met all the criteria of the OSCE.³⁵

Speaking at a press conference, Johan Bäckman mentioned “anti-Russian agitation” and “lots of false information in Western and Russian media”, without specifying any stories or coverage he had in mind. Nevertheless, he believed that “in reality everything was different from what the Russian opposition and its foreign sponsors were trying to show”.³⁶ A Swedish far-right publisher, Vávra Suk, referred to unknown reports in the Finnish media, which allegedly said that the “all-Russian voting” was illegitimate, and endorsed the Russian elections as “meeting all international standards”.³⁷

After he illegally arrived in Russia-annexed Crimea to “observe” the Russian elections there, Gunnar Norbert Lindemann declared that he had been banned from entering Ukraine for his visits to Crimea and Russia-occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine, so he no longer feared Ukrainian sanctions. He also said that the Crimean population was “happy to live in Russia”.³⁸ Former member of the Bulgarian Election Commission Martin Raychev said he did not care about Ukraine’s position regarding his presence in Crimea, noting that he felt he was in Russia.³⁹ In his turn, French far-right MEP Thierry Mariani, who had illegally visited Crimea multiple times, asserted that Crimea “was like a sleeping beauty reviving itself after the reunification with Russia”.⁴⁰

33 Ibid.

34 “‘Organizovat’ golosovanie v usloviyakh pandemii – eto dvoynoe iskusstvo’ – deputat parlamenta Italii Paolo Grimol’di”, *Obshchestvennaya Palata Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 26 June (2020), <https://www.oprf.ru/ru/press/news/2617/newsitem/53901>.

35 Ibid.

36 Antonov, “Ekspert iz Finlyandii obvinil zarubezhnye SMI”.

37 “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli otmetili unikal’nost”.

38 Varvara Kovaleva, Aleksey Goncharov, “Krym – eto Rossiya’: politiki iz Evropy otvetili na protesty Ukrainy”, *RIA Novosti*, 1 July (2020), <https://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20200701/1118457428/Krym--eto-Rossiya-politiki-iz-Evropy-otvetili-na-protesty-Ukrainy.html>.

39 Ibid.

40 Il’ya Izotov, “Politiki Evrosoyuza pribyli v Krym dlya nablyudeniya za golosovaniem”, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 1 July (2020), <https://rg.ru/2020/07/01/reg-ufo/politiki-evrosoiuza-pribyli-v-krym-dlia-nablyudeniia-za-golosovaniem.html>.

Conclusion

In order to have a possibility to stay in power until 2036, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided, in January 2020, to change the Constitution of the Russian Federation and legitimise its change through the “all-Russian voting”. A new legal framework for the vote was created, which became officially known as “the all-Russian voting on amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation”.

The vote was initially planned for 22 April 2020, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was postponed to 1 July; however, Russian voters were allowed to vote in the period between 25 June and 1 Jul 2020.

Russia’s Central Election Committee did not invite any official international observers from established organisations such as the OSCE ODIHR or PACE, because international observation is envisioned only by Russian federal laws on parliamentary and presidential elections, and was not included in the legal framework of the “all-Russian voting”. However, as the Russian authority had done before, they invited – through the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation – 75 foreign individuals who would officially be called “international experts” and be ready to praise any electoral process in Russia as democratic, open, free and fair.

Russian authorities never published a list of the “international experts” they invited to “observe” the voting process, but we have identified 52 such individuals using OSINT methods. The majority of the identified “international experts” have a record of previous direct and indirect 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) legitimisation of the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories known as South Ossetia and Abkhazia; (4) cooperation with Russian state-controlled instruments of disinformation and propaganda (RT

and Sputnik); and (5) membership in organisations advancing the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy interests.

As they were invited effectively to endorse the "all-Russian voting", these "international experts" actively and eagerly commented on the voting process to the Russian media. Six sometimes overlapping lines of argument can be identified in their comments: (1) general praise of the conduct of the "all-Russian voting", (2) praise for Russian technological innovations in the electoral process, (3) focus on the safety issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, (4) positive comparison of the Russian elections to other electoral processes, (5) criticism of allegedly negative Western attitudes towards the "all-Russian voting", and (6) attempts to legitimise the Russian annexation of Crimea.



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