

European politicians to legitimize constitutional changes in Russia

- by Anton Shekhovtsov



Member of the Berlin Parliament Gunnar Lindemann (left) and Member of the German Bundestag Stefan Keuter (right) both from AfD Germany “observing” the all-Russian voting. Source: Facebook account of Gunnar Lindemann, 25.06.2020.

Kremlin-friendly foreign politicians, journalists, lobbyists, and activists have once again been invited to praise the disputed “all-Russian voting” on the constitutional amendments proposed by President Vladimir Putin. The main motivation behind inviting foreign politically biased observers to the “voting”, which has no basis in Russian legislation, is to provide a semblance of international legitimacy to constitutional amendments that have already been approved by the Russian parliament dominated by Putin’s “United Russia” party. According to those amendments, Putin will be allowed to run for another two terms and to stay in power until 2036.

The voting took place from 25 June to 1 July. Neither was an OSCE ODIHR observation mission invited to observe the vote, nor were domestic independent observers allowed to be present in the polling stations during the voting. Russian media covered the statements of the foreign politicians, referring to them often as “international observers”, thus creating the false impression of international acknowledgment of the allegedly democratic and transparent “all-Russian vote”.



These “international experts” largely fall into **five major categories**.

The largest category is represented by far-right politicians, journalists and activists: Member of the German Bundestag **Stefan Keuter** and Member of the Berlin Parliament **Gunnar Lindemann** (both from AfD, Germany); **Volker Tschapke** (Prussian Society, Germany) Member of the Italian Parliament **Paolo Grimoldi** (Northern League, Italy); five French far-right Members of the European Parliament including **Thierry Mariani** (National Rally, France); leaders of the Acton Party (Latvia) **Jevgenijs Korols** and **Einārs Graudiņš**; **Vávra Suk** (*Nya Tider*, Sweden).

The second category is represented by members of mainstream parties known for their pro-Kremlin positions: **Lyubomira Gancheva** (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival, Bulgaria); Member of the Belgrade city assembly **Draginja Vlk** (Serbian Progressive Party, Serbia).

The third group of “experts” consists of Russia-friendly (and often anti-Western) journalists: **Bruno Sommer Catalán** (Chile), **Igor Damjanovic** (Montenegro), **Slobodan Stojićević** (Serbia), **Bashir Hatif** (Afghanistan), **Dimitris Liatsos** (Greece).

The fourth category features pro-Kremlin lobbyists such as **Alexander Rahr** (Germany) or **Johan Bäckman** (Finland).

Finally, the fifth group is formed by representatives of various pro-Russian socio-cultural and academic organisations: **Dimitri de Kochko** (France), **Alexis Tarrade** (France), **Bashir Abbas Samaha** (Lebanon).

Some of the “international experts” (for example, Stefan Keuter, Gunnar Lindemann, Volker Tschapke, Thierry Mariani, Johan Bäckman and Dimitri de Kochko) have previously participated in politically biased election observation “missions” organised by Russian pro-regime institutions. Moreover, Keuter and Tschapke are closely linked to the [AFRIC fake observation mission](#) seeking to support certain African regimes, founded by the structures of US-sanctioned Yevgeniy Prigozhin, also known as “Putin’s chef”.

Some of the European politicians, featuring **Lyubomira Gancheva** (Bulgaria), **Martin Raychev Raykov** (Bulgaria), **MEP Virginie Joron** (France), **MEP Herve Juvin** (France), **MEP Jean-Lin Lacapelle** (France), **MEP Thierry Mariani** (France), **MEP Philippe Olivier** (France), **Gunnar Lindemann** (Germany) and **Erik Almqvist** (Sweden), **visited Crimea**, illegally annexed by Russia from Ukraine in 2014, to “observe” the 2020 “all-Russian voting” there.

The only reason to invite all these “international experts” was to engage them into praising the “all-Russian voting”, which they did while providing commentary for the Russian media. Since much of the international and domestic criticism was directed at the Kremlin’s decision to hold the “voting” during the COVID 19 pandemic, “international experts” commented on the safety precautions allegedly implemented by the Russian authorities. Paolo Grimoldi



noted that Russia was, “in comparison with other countries, one of the best” considering the coronavirus pandemic. In her turn, Draginja Vlk praised the organisation of the “voting”, noting the “highest level of safety” for the voters. And Gunnar Lindemann applauded the decision of the Russian authorities to hold the “voting” for a week, as it presumably allowed to avoid crowds.

Other “international experts”, like Stefan Keuter, contrasted the “all-Russian voting” with the elections in Germany: “You have cameras everywhere, which we do not have in Germany. And it is normal for you when representatives of the opposition are present as observers who control everything”. Russia demonstrated a “high level of transparency”, according to Keuter. Some other “experts” railed against the alleged anti-Russian bias of the Western media reporting on the “all-Russian voting”. Johan Bäckman, who was convicted for harassment and aggravated defamation of a Finnish journalist, insisted that “all the materials, every article, every report in the Western media were a lie”, but failed to cite any example of those presumed “lies” when asked by Russian journalists who interviewed him.

It is important to stress that any international “observers” of this “all-Russian voting” are not part of any official international election observation mission and their statements should not be considered as legitimate assessments of the conduct of the vote.

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. The CEC’s declaration was again repeated on 16 June by the CEC’s secretary, Maya Grishina. Indeed, only Russian federal laws on parliamentary and presidential elections mention and define international observation, which means that there is legal framework for international monitoring of presidential and parliamentary elections. At the same time, no Russian law forbids international observation of elections below the national level, but Russian institutions adhere to a rigid interpretation of the legislation: everything that is not legally explicitly authorised is, therefore, forbidden.

This rigid interpretation allows Russian authorities to not invite observers from established organisations such as the OSCE ODIHR, who are often critical of Russian practices of conducting elections and other plebiscites, but to invite friendly foreign politicians, journalists, and lobbyists who are always ready to praise any election as democratic, open, free and fair instead. Due to the CEC’s position on international observation of Russian elections below the national level, 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 use the term “observers”, thus creating a false impression of the developments around the plebiscite.

EPDE repeats its [recent calls to European national parliaments](#) and to regional parliaments for stronger transparency regulations on the finances of parliamentarians and for respective



changes to their Codes of Conduct. Regulations and Codes of Conduct should be upgraded and adopted to the current political challenges. They should force parliamentarians to report properly and timely on the receipt of any financial donations or gifts. They should contribute to the transparency of their international political activities and should allow sanctions in case of conflict of interest.