

Regional elections
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Russian Federation

“ELECTORAL TOURISTS” FROM ABROAD: WHO ARE THEY?

According to the Central Election Commission of Russia, 774 international observers from 63 countries were accredited in Russia for the 2016 State Duma elections.

There were no official international observers at the September 10, 2017 elections, but election commissions and media reported about a group of foreigners who came to Russia with the informal status of “foreign experts.” Despite the fact that they had no official status of international/foreign observers, and, according to Russian law, could not be present in the voting premises, they were welcomed by the election commissions and allowed to spend time at the polling stations.

Since such electoral tourists should also be expected at the Russian presidential elections scheduled for March 2018, *Golos* decided to analyze this phenomenon. We sourced our information from the local and foreign media.

Who was there

Since the “foreign experts” did not receive the official status of international/foreign observers envisioned by the Russian legislation, there is no official list of these persons. Detailed media monitoring allowed *Golos* specialists to discover approximately 20 names. More than half of the visitors were from France and Italy. Almost all of the “observers” were from the European Union, save for two citizens of South Korea and one US citizen.



The most striking guest was **Aymeri d’Artagnan**, a former member of the European and French parliaments, the owner of a castle in the province of Gascony and of de Tréville’s sword, and the chairman of the Association of Musketeers. Monsieur d’Artagnan went to observe the process at the Yaroslavl Region, which seemed to be at the center of the whole electoral campaign. Prior to the musketeer, it was visited thrice by Vladimir Putin himself.

Here’s an example of the typical mention of this international expert in the regional and federal media: “Aymeri d’Artagnan admitted that he

tried to outwit the automatic system of bulletin processing, but he failed. “I can say that Russia is ahead of many states with this system,” said Aymeri d’Artagnan, representative of the National Public Monitoring Association of Observers.”

Following the elections, monsieur d’Artagnan gave a big interview to the Russian online media lenta.ru. He said that he visits Russia often, has known [actor] Mikhail Boyarsky (who played the role of d’Artagnan in the Soviet movie adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*) for a long time, and once was an observer at elections in Tver. The former deputy also commented on Russian-French relations:

— Will the Russian elections get any coverage in France?

— I’m afraid that reaction in France will be critical even though nobody came [to Russia] and doesn’t know anything. This is why I’m happy to give such interviews — it’s a chance for me to show that Russia has a new and reliable system and that the Russians themselves trust the election results. And if that is so, other countries should also trust these results.

The highest ranking guest was the former Irish politician **Tom Kitt**, who currently heads the organization called Self Help Africa. This was practically the first time that Mr. Kitt was mentioned in the Russian news: “The Irishman Tom Kitt, a former minister and member of parliament, came as an international observer.

He spent the Election Day in Yaroslavl and Rostov, observing the testing of state-of-the-art technologies, and



was impressed. “I watched the barcode-reading system in operation, I saw the voting machines, and CCTV monitoring. You bring a lot of good modern technologies to the voting process. I cannot find any shortcomings, and you are ahead of other countries in this regard. Everything is very open and transparent. Russia had a fantastic start, there’s nothing for me to criticize. I will go home with a very positive experience,” says the observer from Ireland Tom Kitt.”

and provide commentary on European politics for the Kremlin-controlled media. Since 2014 they have regularly visited the Crimea.

The majority of observers who came from Italy and France visit Russia regularly



The Leningrad Region was visited by **Gianluca Savoini**, the president of the Lombardy-Russia cultural association and the deputy of the Italian parliament representing the far right Northern League party. Mr. Savoini is a close associate of the party's leader Matteo Salvini, who is connected to Marine Le Pen's National Front in France.

Speaking at the press conference, the Italian politician stated that there are no significant differences in the organization of elections in Italy and Russia.

“There are no problems with expression of will, despite the ongoing accusations from the Western media and the torrent of anti-Russian propaganda that we hear,” Savoini said.



Another representative of the Northern League came to observe the elections in the Kirov Region. **Stefano Valdegamberi** is a regional deputy elected to the Regional Council of Veneto from the personal list of Luca Zaia, the activist of the aforementioned party and the former Minister of Agriculture in Silvio Berlusconi's government.

Mr. Valdegamberi was especially interested in the QR coding system for the election commission protocols: “Our special goal was to see the new electronic QR coding system in action, we wanted to see how it

works. Before this system was introduced in Italy, we had some mistakes with vote counting and we wanted to see the way it works in Russia. This electronic system is a very important guarantee for the citizens of your country, and I can say for sure that when I get back to Italy, I will advise the Italians to use this system.”

The Frenchmen Thierry Mariani and Nicolas Dhuicq came to watch the elections in Crimea, particularly in Sevastopol. Both are members of The Republican party, and in recent presidential elections in France supported Francois Fillon, who is considered to be Vladimir Putin's friend.



Thierry Mariani is the former Secretary of State for Transport and the current member of the French Parliament representing the French living abroad, including in the CIS countries. In the mid-2000s he married a native of Yekaterinburg Irina Shaikhullina, who was given French citizenship in 2011. Since 2012, he's been the co-chair of the Dialogue Franco-Russe Association together with [the former CEO of Russian Railways] Vladimir

Yakunin. Mr. Mariani has been coming to Crimea once a year from 2015. Mr. Mariani announced that the voting was orderly and democratic: "It's my third time in Crimea since it rejoined Russia. We came to Sevastopol, because these are the first elections. Elections at Sevastopol are symbolic, they are different from elections in other Russian regions."

Nicolas Dhuicq is the former member of the French Parliament and the current mayor of Brienne-le-Château. As a deputy, he demanded that the National Assembly lift the anti-Russian sanctions and accused the then-presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron of secret ties with the international gay lobby. Using his signature blustery style, Mr. Dhuicq commented on the Russian elections: "The European Union considers itself a democracy. And it should applaud the fact that people at Sevastopol went and voted. And they can come here, to this city, and see for themselves that there are no soldiers on the streets here."

Half of the "observers" represented the right-wing European parties. In addition to the aforementioned activists of Italy's Northern League and France's Republicans, Russia was visited by André Elissen from the Dutch Party for Freedom, Aldo Carcaci of the Belgian People's Party, and Dominique Bilde, a member of another French right-wing party, the National Front. Still, there were some leftist politicians as well, who seem to keep faith to the Socialist-Democratic ideals since the Soviet times.





Rumen Gechev is a member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, a member of parliament and the former Minister of Economy in the government of Zhan Videnov. In Soviet times, he was a secret informant of the First Administration of State Security working under the pseudonym Economov. This Social Democrat came to observe the elections in the Kaliningrad Region, where Anton Alikhanov, Russia's youngest regional head, was

elected governor with semi-official support from the Kremlin. Comrade Gechev decided to forego bold statements: "It was interesting for me to compare election processes in Russia and Bulgaria. Mostly it all checks out. We visited eight polling stations, and everywhere we saw an orderly process, people voting in great mood, and we saw no violations."

The only US "observer" was lawyer **Kline Preston**, who's been working in Russia for over 20 years, presiding over the Kline Preston Law Group, which specializes in copyright and corporate law.

— I never saw any problems with Russia's election system. Elections here are always open and transparent, and that's wonderful, - Preston was quoted by Ryazan's 7 News information agency.

In April of 2017, *The Washington Post* reported on how American conservatives grew closer to Russia over similar attitudes to guns and religion, and here's what the paper wrote: "In 2011, Kline Preston introduced David Keen, then the NRA's president, to a Russian senator Alexander Torshin." And this is the "evaluation" that Kline Preston provided for Russia's 2011 parliamentary elections: "Everything went well, I saw no violations. I agree with my colleagues that the elections were open and fair."

Deputy of the Swedish parliament **Pavel Gamov**, who represents the nationalist party Sweden Democrats, watched the elections in the Moscow Region along with the European Parliament deputy Jaromír Kohlíček from the Czech Republic (Communist Party). On September 19, the leader of the Sweden Democrats parliamentary group Mattias Karlsson announced that Pavel Gamov has been officially on sick leave for the last three weeks, but said that Gamov told him that he went to Russia on invitation from the organization, which seemed to him critical of the current Russian regime. The trip wasn't pre-approved by the Sweden Democrats party. Two other Swedish MPs — Anders Ygeman and Kent Härstedt, who oversee the Swedish international observers in OSCE missions — criticized Gamov over the dubious reputation of the host organization, and accused him of legitimizing Russian elections with his presence.

Who invited the foreigners

Officially, the foreigners came to Russia on invitation from the National Public Monitoring Association, which was established prior to the elections with no state registration. All of their actions were de facto planned and broadcast at state level. The principal messages were broadcast by the state-controlled information agencies. The most "media-savvy" "foreign experts" provided commentary to the federal TV channels such as Channel One, VGTRK and NTV, as well as to the largest print and online media. After that, they were



retransmitted by the regional and niche media. As a rule, the international observers' comments were given at the end of the articles and repeated the three principal points: "there were no violations," "elections in Russia and the West are organized similarly," and "the special trait of the elections is the use of state-of-the-art digital technologies for counting and processing the votes." Another special feature is the use of foreign guest's at the most politically important regions. The key regions were the ones where Putin's protégés ran for governors, such as the Yaroslavl and Kaliningrad Regions, as well as Crimea, which, according to Thierry Mariani, has a "symbolic" significance.

On September 6, the National Public Monitoring announced that the organization will send its observers to 20,000 polling stations.

At the same time, the data of the Play Market shows that the application that was developed in order to help these observers was only downloaded and installed by 50-100 people — and that's on the second day AFTER the election.

This application was developed by the company Replication Technologies LLC (director and owner — Ye.L. Shirkovtsova). According to the company's project portfolio, published on its website, earlier it had developed the Polling Stations Database information system for the United Russia party, worked for the Central Election Commission of Russia on several projects such as the interface of data reporting for the Vybory state automated system, modernization of the video broadcasting system of the Central Election Commission's web portal, modification of the subsystems for personnel training and document flow of Vybory system, and the development of special software for the AKRIKO program of the Vybory system. Strangely enough, there are no traces of state order tenders for the work performed by the Replication Technologies LLC for the Vybory state automated system.

The election commission protocols that were collected via the application and published on the National Public Monitoring's map, were mostly represented by the so-called SONSO (state-organized non-state organizations) *For Clean Elections* and *Russia Votes*. The total number of protocols was 478, which is far less than the declared 20,000 observers.

Although the National Public Monitoring announced observation of 20,000 polling stations, its "Map of violations" only has 160 reports (to compare, Golos Movement's "Map of violations" has over 1,700 reports). In Moscow, where over 100 election campaigns were held, the organization only has 7 reports, of which two simply quote the *Kommersant* daily. It should also be noted that almost half of all reports were copied from Golos' "Map of violations" (72 reports out of 160). The organization's own reports range from very simple "Everything's good" (District election commission #200, Republic of Altai) to alarmingly opaque "Ballot boxes are in their field of vision, which increases the risk of stuffing falsification" (Kemerovo Region).

The raggle taggle team of foreign "observers" was obviously meant to increase the legitimacy of the Russian elections. It's difficult to say whether this was meant for domestic or foreign audiences, but that's not particularly important. Since the size and sources of financing for the travel, lodging and escorting expenses of "foreign experts" are kept secret, it's difficult to evaluate the efficiency of such investments. Especially since the previous experience of inviting such "observer missions" proved to be very dubious because of the negative reputation of such "experts." For example, the 2012 presidential elections in Russia were observed by two "experts" from Poland, whose work raises lots of questions in their home country — Mateusz Piskorski and Bartosz Kownacki. The most odious of them is Mr. Piskorski, who in 2014 was one of the first people to announce the success of the referendum in Crimea, although the votes were still being counted at that moment. Since May 2016, he's been under arrest over suspicion of spying in favour of Russia. The second observer, Bartosz Kownacki, a key lieutenant of the Polish Defense Minister, is suspected by local media of collaborating with the pro-Kremlin organizations.