

Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018

Report by Anton Shekhovtsov



Foreign observers and co-organisers of their monitoring mission meeting with representatives of the Russian occupying authorities in Sevastopol. Left to right: Yuriy Navoyan, Diego Guillen Perez, Alexander Kobrinskiy, Alexander Petukhov, Olga Timofeeva, Marco Marsili, Alexander Grönlund, Maria Olshanskaya, Ulf Grönlund, Kristofer Wåhlander, Mger Simonyan, Diana Lutsker, Alexander Kulagin.

Introduction

In December 2017, the Russian media reported that neither the OSCE ODIHR nor the EU would send any electoral monitors to Russia-annexed Crimea to observe the Russian presidential election on the 18th of March 2018.¹ This report came as no surprise: these institutions do not recognise the Russian status of Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea annexed in March 2014, therefore, they consider any Russia-controlled electoral process in Crimea as illegitimate, while sending electoral observers there would provide legitimacy to the annexation.

¹ Dmitry Laru, Angelina Galanina, "Krym ne ostavyat bez nablyudeniya", *Izvestiya*, 25 December (2017), <https://iz.ru/686918/dmitrii-laru-angelina-galanina/krym-ne-ostaviat-bez-nabliudeniia>.

The Russian authorities were obviously not surprised by the statements of the OSCE ODIHR and EU either. Citing Russian diplomatic sources, the media reported that “dozens of international experts, including members of national parliaments of EU Member States” would monitor the presidential election in Crimea.² The same sources mentioned several EU Member States: Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France and Italy. According to Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Slutsky, “the group of experts would feature parliamentarians who advocate the legitimacy of Crimea’s reunification with Russia [...]. Their presence on the peninsula would suffice, and their voice would be heard in the international community”.³ Another source from the Russian authorities said that “around ten parliamentarians” would observe the election in Crimea.⁴



Cypriot observers Sofoklis Yanni Sofokli (left) and Skevi Koukouma

At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities warned that any participation in the electoral process in Crimea would be illegal. On the 15th of December 2017, Ukraine’s deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vasyl Bodnar stated that “the observers, social activists or politicians, who would visit the occupied Crimea for monitoring the [presidential] election, would be considered as persons who would later be banned from entering Ukraine and put under relevant international sanctions”.⁵

The warning from the Ukrainian authorities did not persuade several foreign actors from declaring that they would observe the presidential election in Crimea. On the same day when the Ukrainian authorities made their statement, Andreas Maurer, the leader of the parliamentary group of the German Left party (Die Linke) in the Osnabrück region, claimed that “there would be a delegation from Germany at the presidential election in Crimea, and I would be part of it. [...] I am sure that politicians and public figures from France, Italy and other European states would go to Crimea too [...]”.⁶ A few days later, an Italian journalist and former far-left politician Giulietto Chiesa said that he would definitely go to Crimea to

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dmitry Laru, Angelina Galanina, Tatyana Baykova, “Bolee 150 inostrannykh deputatov posetyat prezidentskie vybory v Rossii”, *Izvestiya*, 22 January (2018), <https://iz.ru/697617/dmitrii-laru-angelina-galanina-tatiana-baikova/bolee-150-inostrannykh-deputatov-posetiat-prezidentskie-vybory-v-rossii>.

⁵ “U MZS Ukrainy zayavlyayut’ pro nezakonnist’ bud’-yakoyi uchasti u vyborchomu protsesi v okupovanomu Krymu”, *Interfax*, 15 December (2017), <http://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/political/470168.html>.

⁶ “Nemetskiy politik otvetil Kievu: nablyudateli iz Germanii priyut v Krym”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 15 December (2017), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20171215/1113171605.html>.

observe the election if he could.⁷ In February 2018, Serge Phocas Odunlami, a dual Beninese/Russian citizen and president of the Moscow-based NGO “House of Africa”, stated that he had proposed his organisation as a participant of the monitoring mission in Crimea and that he would try to involve other NGOs from Africa in the observation process.⁸ The three cited actors had already visited Crimea illegally before, yet, despite their statements, there is no evidence that either Odunlami or Chiesa observed the presidential election in Crimea, but Maurer indeed was part of the mission, although his claim that he would bring “a German delegation” was – as the research suggests – grossly exaggerated.

Russian coordinators of the observation mission

On the day of the election, Ella Pamfilova, Chairwoman of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Russia, revealed that, in Crimea, there were 43 officially accredited foreign observers from 20 countries, who were formally invited by the Federation Council or the State Duma.⁹ Invitations from the Federation Council were signed by its Deputy Chairman Ilyas Umakhanov; those from the State Duma were signed by its Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin. However, both institutions were just the highest actors in the hierarchy of those organisations that coordinated individual observers who would monitor the illegitimate presidential election in Crimea. The full official list of those observers has not been made public so far. The analysis of Russian media reports suggests that there were several Russian organisations that engaged with the foreign “Crimean observers”. These organisations include, but are most likely not limited to, the following: (1) Civic Control Association (CCA) headed by Alexander Brod, (2) Agency of Ethno-National Strategies (AENS) headed by Alexander Kobrinskiy, (3) Russian Peace Foundation (RPF) headed by Leonid Slutsky, (4) Foundation for the Development of Eurasian Cooperation (FDEC) headed by Mger Simonyan, and (5) Civic Organisation “Dialogue” headed by Yuriy Navoyan.

The CCA has already been involved in several attempts to provide legitimacy to internationally illegitimate electoral processes in Ukraine. For example, in March 2014, the CCA coordinated a large bulk of foreign observers of the “referendum” in Crimea that was followed by the formal annexation of this Ukrainian republic by Russia; while, in November 2014, the CCA provided foreign observers for the “parliamentary elections” in the Russia-occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine. For the 2018 presidential election in Crimea, the CCA cooperated with the Alexander Kobrinskiy, a member of the far-right, misleadingly named Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and a permanent expert of the CCA.

At the end of February 2018, Kobrinskiy, who represented the LDPR in the CEC in 2006-2008 and took part in several OSCE ODIHR electoral observation missions since 2013, sent out letters to several European organisations inviting them to observe the Russian presidential election in Crimea. As he confessed that he was “really saddened and truly disappointed” that “ODIHR OSCE and some other international organizations” “would not observe the presidential elections in Crimea, Kobrinskiy said that his plan was to “to organize a group of independent international observers to monitor the elections” in Crimea.

⁷ “Italyanskiy zhurnalist: priedu na vybory v Krym, nesmotrya na ugrozy Kievu”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 22 December (2017), <http://crimea.ria.ru/radio/20171222/1113258788.html>.

⁸ “Nablyudateli iz Afriki khotyat priekhat’ na vybory prezidenta Rossii v Krym”, *RIA Novosti*, 16 February (2018), https://ria.ru/election2018_news/20180216/1514779225.html.

⁹ “Pamfilova: mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli v Krymu byli priglasheny Gosdumoy i Sovfedom”, *TASS*, 18 March (2018), <http://tass.ru/politika/5041998>. The number was previously voiced here: “Khod vyborov v Krymu prokontroliuyut 43 inostrannykh nablyudatelya – Stepanov”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 16 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180316/1114035013.html>.

Kobriniski promised that they – he did not specify who exactly – would “provide visa support and cover travel expenses, accommodation, health insurance and daily living expenses in Russia”.



Foreign observers at a polling station. Left to right: Marija Janjušević, Stefano Valdegamberi, Roberto Ciambetti, Dragana Trifković, Slaviša Ristić.

On the 16th of March, Kobriniski, as well as Yuriy Navoyan of the “Dialogue” and Mger Simonyan of the FDEC, turned up in Crimea leading a group of several foreign observers. The following people were present in this group: Mohamed Al-Hamali,¹⁰ Alexander Grönlund, Ulf Grönlund, Lars Peder Bjørndal Hollænder, Diana Lutsker, Marco Marsili, Tetyana Mele, Maria Olshanskaya, Diego Guillen Perez, Narcís Romà i Monfà and Kristofer Wåhlander.¹¹ While the visit to Crimea of this particular group of foreign observers was jointly organised by the AENS,

“Dialogue” and FDEC, at the moment it is impossible to determine what particular observers were invited either by Kobriniski, or Navoyan, or Simonyan. However, it seems viable to suggest that Kobriniski had known Hollænder and Marsili since at least 2017 when all three of them monitored the presidential election in the Kyrgyz Republic as members of the OSCE ODIHR electoral observation mission.¹²

On the 17th of March, the Simferopol airport saw a large group of foreign observers that included, but was not limited to, the following people: Carmen Luisa Bohórquez-Morán, Gilbert Doctorow, Éric Doligé, Aleksandrs Gaponenko, Marija Janjušević, Jérôme Lambert, Jacques Myard, Bernhard Ulrich Oehme, Patrick Poppel, Slaviša Ristić, Nishan Selvaraj, Dragana Trifković, Stefano Valdegamberi.

It is unclear whether these observers were coordinated by one Russian organisation or several, but the visit to Crimea of the three French monitors (Doligé, Lambert and Myard) was a result of the cooperation between the RPF and the France-based Association “French-Russian Dialogue” (Association Dialogue Franco-Russe, ADFR)¹³ presided by Thierry Mariani, a member of the French centre-right Republicans party and former MP.¹⁴ The RPF’s Slutsky, who was recently accused of sexual harassment by several

¹⁰ This name was transliterated from Russian, so the current spelling may slightly differ from the original name in English.

¹¹ This list of observers comprising this particular group may not be complete.

¹² OSCE, “Kyrgyzstan, Presidential Election, 15 October 2017: Final Report”, OSCE, 8 March (2018), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kyrgyzstan/374740>.

¹³ “Loiret: Eric Doligé observateur des élections en Russie”, *Magcentre*, 8 March (2018), <http://www.magcentre.fr/149487-loiret-eric-dolige-observateur-des-elections-en-russie/>.

¹⁴ On the 16th of March, the Russian media announced that Mariani would bring more than 20 French observers to Crimea to monitor the election: “Na vybory v Krym priedet delegatsiya nablyudateley iz Frantsii vo glave s Mariani”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 16 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180316/1114035257.html>. But that report was either a mistake or propaganda: only three above-mentioned French observers from Mariani’s delegation went to Crimea, while all the others, including Mariani himself, observed the election in Russia, rather than Crimea.

Russian female journalists¹⁵ and is, like Kobrinskiy, a member of the far-right LPDR, has been in contact with the ADFR at least since 2006.¹⁶ Slutsky is a member of the ADFR,¹⁷ and his RPF funded Mariani's trips to Moscow and Russia-annexed Crimea in 2015.¹⁸ Like the CCA, Slutsky was involved, in 2014, in providing observers for the "referendum" in Crimea and "parliamentary elections" in occupied East Ukrainian territories, but, unlike the CCA, Slutsky was bringing Russian, rather than foreign, observers at that time. Another Russian organisation, which was, to a certain extent, involved in bringing a foreign actor to Crimea in relation to the presidential election, was the National Social Monitoring (NSM) headed by Alexander Zakuskin. Upon the invitation of the NSM, G. Kline Preston IV visited Sevastopol on the 13th of March in the role of "a foreign expert" in order to "evaluate the new voting system".¹⁹ However, no media report stated that Preston was an electoral observer, while other evidence suggests that he was not present in Crimea on the day of the election, therefore, the NSM cannot be, at least at the moment, added to the list of the Russian organisations that engaged with the foreign "Crimean observers".

Foreign observers and other actors in Crimea on the Election Day

So far, 35 out of 43 foreign official observers who were illegally present in Crimea on the Election Day have been identified, see Table 1.

Table 1. Identified foreign observers at the presidential election in Crimea

No.	Country	Name	Political affiliation	Russian coordinator
1	Afghanistan	Ikhlas Mohammad Tamim	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
2	Austria	Patrick Poppel	N/A	*Unknown
3	Cyprus	Elias Demetriou	Progressive Party for the Working People	*Unknown
4	Cyprus	Skevi Koukouma Koutra	Progressive Party for the Working People	*Unknown
5	Cyprus	Dimitrios Liatsos	N/A	*Unknown
6	Cyprus	Sofoklis Yanni Sofokli	Progressive Party for the Working People	*Unknown
7	Denmark	Lars Peder Bjørndal Hollænder	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
8	Finland	Johan Bäckman	N/A	*Unknown
9	France	Éric Doligé	The Republicans	RPF
10	France	Hubert Fayard	N/A	*Unknown
11	France	Jérôme Lambert	Socialist Party	RPF

¹⁵ Anna Rivina, Olga Strakhovskaya, "Zhurnalistski obvinili Leonida Slutskogo v domogatel'stvakh", *Meduza*, 28 February (2018), <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/02/28/zhurnalistski-obvinili-leonida-slutskogo-v-domogatelstvakh-oni-mogut-podat-v-sud-a-chto-s-deputatskoy-neprikosnovennostyu>.

¹⁶ "Prazdnovanie Dnya Vzyatiya Bastilii", *Rossiyskiy Fond Mira*, 13 July (2006), <http://www.peacefond.ru/structure/chairman/?id=15>.

¹⁷ "Sloutski Léonid", *Association Dialogue Franco-Russe*, <http://dialoguefrancorusse.com/fr/association/membres-partenaires/120-membres/690-sloutski-leonid.html>.

¹⁸ Polina Khimshiashvili, "Frantsuzskie deputaty vystupili v Moskve v podderzhku politiki Rossii", *RBC*, 9 April (2015), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/04/2015/552668fa9a7947cca2177670>; "Glava frantsuzskoy parlamentskoy delegatsii rasskazal o tsenyakh vizita v Krym", *TASS*, 22 July (2015), <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2134645>.

¹⁹ "Sevizbirkom posetil ekspert iz SShA", *Sevastopol'skaya gorodskaya izbiratel'naya komissiya*, 12 March (2018), <http://www.sevastopol.izbirkom.ru/news/sevizbirkom-posetil-ekspert-iz-ssha.html>.

No.	Country	Name	Political affiliation	Russian coordinator
12	France	Jacques Myard	The Republicans	RPF
13	Germany	Andreas Maurer	The Left	*Unknown
14	Germany	Bernhard Ulrich Oehme	Alternative for Germany	*Unknown
15	Israel	Diana Lutsker	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
16	Israel	Maria Olshanskaya	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
17	Italy	Marco Marsili	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
18	Italy	Roberto Ciambetti	Northern League	*Unknown
19	Italy	Stefano Valdegamberi	Northern League	*Unknown
20	Latvia	Aleksandrs Gapoņenko	N/A	*Unknown
21	Malaysia	Nishan Selvaraj	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
22	Norway	Mette Rosenlund	N/A	*Unknown
23	Norway	Hendrik Weber	N/A	*Unknown
24	Serbia	Marija Janjušević	Serbian Movement Dveri	*Unknown
25	Serbia	Slaviša Ristić	Democratic Party of Serbia	*Unknown
26	Serbia	Dragana Trifković	N/A	*Unknown
27	Spain	Diego Guillen Perez	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
28	Spain	Narcís Romà i Monfà	Republican Left of Catalonia	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
29	Sweden	Alexander Grönlund	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
30	Sweden	Ulf Grönlund	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
31	Sweden	Kristofer Wåhländer	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
32	UK	Mohamed Al-Hamali	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
33	Ukraine	Tetyana Mele ²⁰	N/A	CCA/AENS/FDEC/ Dialogue
34	USA	Gilbert Doctorow	N/A	*Unknown
35	Venezuela	Carmen Luisa Bohórquez- Morán	United Socialist Party of Venezuela	*Unknown

Also present in Crimea on the Election Day were several foreign actors who were accredited as journalists and entered Crimea illegally. They did not act as observers, but they did accompany accredited foreign

²⁰ Tetyana Mele was presented as an observer from Ukraine, and even her name was spelt in the Ukrainian way, i.e. “Tetyana”, rather than in accordance with the Russian spelling, “Tatyana”. However, the analysis of her profiles on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100003082504317>) and VK (<https://vk.com/id246868156>) suggest that, while she was indeed born in Ukraine (namely in the city of Khmelnytsky), she currently lives either in Russia (St. Petersburg) or Germany, and spells her name in the Russian way, i.e. “Tatyana”.

observers. The precise number of these journalists is currently unknown, but we have identified two of them, see Table 2.

Table 2. Identified foreign journalists at the presidential election in Crimea

No.	Country	Name	Media	Entourage of
1	Germany	Thomas Ludwig	<i>Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung</i>	Andreas Maurer
2	Germany	Manuel Ochsenreiter	<i>Zuerst!</i>	Bernhard Ulrich Oehme

Furthermore, Johan Bäckman, who was an accredited electoral observer, was reported to have led “a Finnish delegation” of 9 people (including Bäckman himself) who were presented as members of the Finland-based Russian-Finnish Friendship Association headed by Daria Skippari-Smirnov. The delegation illegally travelled to Crimea for the period 13-20 March 2018, and during this period was used by the Russian media for the propaganda purposes.²¹ So far, 5 members of the “Finnish delegation” have been identified, see Table 3.

Table 3. Identified members of the delegation from Finland in Crimea on 13-20 March 2018

No.	Name	Affiliation
1	Eero Hult	True Finns
2	Svetlana Mustonen	*Unknown
3	Ludmila Odintsova	*Unknown
4	Marjaliisa Siira	Finnish Peace Committee
5	Daria Skippari-Smirnov	Russian-Finnish Friendship Association

Finally, there was an international delegation of around 20 people, mostly students (the exact number is unknown), who were present in Crimea on the Election Day, see Table 4. This delegation was part of the international youth forum “Russia – a Country of Opportunities” that was organised by the Russian Presidential Administration and took place in Moscow on 13-16 March 2018. After the forum finished, some of the participants illegally travelled to Crimea on the 16th of March. Despite the misleading reports,²² they were not accredited as observers.²³ However, they visited polling stations and made election-related comments for the Russian media,²⁴ some of which falsely presented them as electoral monitors and, therefore, turned the participants of the forum into the instruments of the Kremlin’s propaganda.

²¹ “Finskaya delegatsiya planiruet eshche dvazhdy v etom godu posetit’ Krym”, *Kryminform*, 16 March (2018), <http://www.c-inform.info/news/id/62869>; Ekaterina Seryugina, Aleksey Romanov, “Yokhan Bekman: ‘U finnov ogromnoe zhelanie voochiyu uvidet’ Krym””, *Pervy krymskiy*, 16 March (2018), <http://1tvcrimea.ru/pages/news/072048-johan-bekman-u-finnov-ogromnoe-zhelanie-voochiju-uvideet-krym>.

²² Víctor Ternovsky, “Observador español sobre presidenciales en Crimea: ‘La experiencia es acabar enfadado’”, *Sputnik*, 22 March (2018), https://mundo.sputniknews.com/radio_que_pasa/201803221077251101-elecciones-presidenciales-en-crimea/.

²³ Were the delegation of around 20 participants of the forum “Russia – a Country of Opportunities” to be added to the number of the already identified foreign observers (35 people, see Table 1), then the total number of foreign observers would exceed their official number, i.e. 43 people. Moreover, while in Crimea, no member of this delegation wore a special card issued by the CEC identifying them as official observers.

²⁴ “Uchastnikov foruma ‘Rossiya – strana vozmozhnostey’ udivilo chislo golosuyushchikh v Sevastopole”, *TASS*, 18 March (2018), <http://tass.ru/politika/5042791>; “Chto v Sevastopole dovelo studenta iz Vyetnama do slyoz”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 20 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/society/20180320/1114072832.html>.

Table 4. Identified participants of the Forum “Russia – a Country of Opportunities” at the presidential election in Crimea

No.	Country	Name	Affiliation/academic institution
1	Turkmenistan	Dovran Bashimov	*Unknown
2	France	Nicolas Charras	*Unknown
3	Columbia	Ivan Cruz	Saint Thomas Aquinas University
4	Vietnam	Qang Huỳnh Đức	Railway College
5	Serbia	Stefan Đurić	University of Kragujevac
6	Egypt	Mohammed Abd Ellateef	*Unknown
7	Pakistan	Absa Komal	Geo News Urdu
8	Pakistan	Muhammad Ibrahim Khan	U.S. Ambassador’s Youth Council – Pakistan
9	Kazakhstan	Yelena Khegay	*Unknown
10	Turkey	Güler Nesrin Kocaman	Dokuz Eylül University
11	Spain	Javi de Lara	University of Castilla-La Mancha
12	Germany	Artur Leier	*Unknown
13	Serbia	Djordje Petrovic	University of Kragujevac
14	Spain	Enrique Refoyo	*Unknown
15	Jordan	Mohammad J. Qardan	Oxford Brookes University
16	Ecuador	Sixto Zotaminga	Youth Network of Pichincha

Established involvement of “Crimean observers” in pro-Kremlin efforts

A number of foreign actors who observed the illegitimate presidential election in Crimea on the 18th of March 2018 have a record of previous involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts that can be defined, in the context of this report, as activities aimed at promoting the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests, in particular legitimising and justifying actions of the Russian Federation directed at undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

Patrick Poppel is the general secretary of the Austria-based pro-Kremlin Suvorov Institute that “pursues a nationalist, anti-liberal and anti-Western agenda”.²⁵ In 2016-2017, Poppel was a regular contributor to the Russian, fiercely anti-Western website Katehon established by the Russian ultranationalist businessman Konstantin Malofeev who sponsored the initial separatist activities in Ukraine in the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In 2016, Poppel demonstrated in Vienna holding a flag of the so-called Novorossiia (New Russia), a non-existent separatist state allegedly located within the internationally recognised borders of Ukraine. In January 2018, Poppel co-hosted a visit of Russian fascist Alexander Dugin to Vienna.²⁶

²⁵ Fabian Schmid, Markus Sulzbacher, “Sputnik, FPÖ, Identitäre: Russisch-rechtes Rendezvous in Wien”, *Der Standard*, 31 July (2016), <https://derstandard.at/2000042003825/Sputnik-Gudenus-Identitaere-Russisch-rechtes-Rendezvous-in-Wien>.

²⁶ Gerhard Lechner, “‘Russland hat das getan, was Dugin zuvor gesagt hatte’”, *Wiener Zeitung*, 26 January (2018), https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/europa/europastaaten/943553_Russland-hat-das-getan-was-Dugin-zuvor-gesagt-hatte.html.



Foreign observers Bernhard Ulrich Oehme (left) and Johan Bäckman (centre), with German far-right journalist Manuel Ochsenreiter (right)

Johan Bäckman is a long-time pro-Kremlin political activist who, among the other observers of the presidential election in Crimea in 2018, was the only foreign actor who had observed the illegitimate referendum in Crimea in March 2014. In May 2014, Bäckman declared himself a representative of the separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DNR) in Finland. He frequently travelled to the DNR and, in October 2016, observed the so-called primary regional elections there. For his blatant pro-Kremlin activities elsewhere, he was banned from entering Estonia and Moldova in 2009 and 2014 respectively, as well as being charged, in March 2018, with harassment and aggravated defamation of a Finnish journalist who investigated the activities of the Russian “troll factory”.²⁷

Jérôme Lambert and Jacques Myard were part of Thierry Mariani’s delegation to Crimea in July 2015 upon the invitation from Leonid Slutsky. The Ukrainian authorities imposed a 3-year entry ban on Lambert and Myard for illegally crossing the internationally recognised Ukrainian border.²⁸

Soviet-born Andreas Maurer has illegally travelled to Crimea several times since June 2016 and, during his first visit, suggested that the Osnabrück parliament could recognise the “Russian status” of Crimea. Maurer is a regular commentator for the Russian state media, and – presenting himself as the leader of the “Public Diplomacy Germany” project – he also travelled to the DNR in February 2018 to discuss “further cooperation opportunities [and] business partnership”.²⁹

Marital partners Mette Rosenlund and Hendrik Weber illegally travelled to Crimea for the first time in October 2017 as representatives of the “Public Diplomacy Norway”.³⁰ Together with Maurer, Weber travelled to the DNR in February 2018.

²⁷ “Controversial Academic Charged over Harassment, Slander of Yle Journalist”, *Yle*, 26 March (2018), https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/controversial_academic_charged_over_harassment_slander_of_yle_journalist/10134347.

²⁸ “Posetivshim Krym frantsuzskim deputatam zpreschen v’yezd v Ukrainu na 3 goda”, *Interfax*, 30 July (2015), <http://interfax.com.ua/news/general/281063.html>.

²⁹ “Zakharchenko Meets Politicians and Social Activists from Russia, Germany and Norway”, *DAN*, 19 February (2018), <https://dan-news.info/en/world-en/zakharchenko-meets-politicians-and-social-activists-from-russia-germany-and-norway.html>.

³⁰ Stian Eisenräger, Magnus Newth, Ole Kristian Strøm, “Norske aktivister får kritikk for tur til Krimhalvøya”, *VG*, 6 October (2017), <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/rusland/norske-aktivister-faar-kritikk-for-tur-til-krimhalvoeya/a/24156607/>.



Foreign observers Andreas Maurer (left) and Hendrik Weber (right).

Roberto Ciambetti first illegally travelled to Crimea in October 2016 as part of the delegation of around 20 Italian politicians and businessmen. While in Crimea, Ciambetti, who is also President of the Regional Council of Veneto, signed – together with the EU-sanctioned “Chairman of State Council of the Republic of Crimea” Vladimir Konstantinov – a joint statement on the development of interregional cooperation. Ciambetti also participated in the Yalta International Economic Forum (YIEF) in April 2016. In January 2018, Ciambetti and several other politicians presented the YIEF at the European Parliament.³¹

A member of the regional parliament of Veneto, Stefano Valdegamberi illegally visited Crimea in April 2016, and, after upon his return, was reported to have initiated a vote on recognising Crimea as part of Russia in the Veneto parliament. Together with Ciambetti, he was part of the delegation of Italian politicians and businessmen that visited Crimea in October 2016. He also observed regional elections in Russia in September 2017.

Aleksandrs Gapoņenko is co-chair of the Congress of Russian Communities in Latvia and has been involved in pro-Kremlin activities mostly in the Baltic states. According to the Latvia security services, Gapoņenko promoted the narrative of the Second World War “in accordance with the Russian understanding of history” and “attempted to popularise the opinion of alleged ‘discrimination of ethnic minorities’ in Latvia”.³²

Dragana Trifković is the head of the Belgrade Centre of Strategic Research and a regular commentator for the Russian state-controlled media. She was one of the observers of the so-called parliamentary elections in the DNR in November 2014. In October 2015, she illegally visited Crimea as part of a delegation from

³¹ “Izmeneniya v rossiyskom Krymu otsenili v Evroparlamente”, *Lenta*, 23 January (2018), https://lenta.ru/news/2018/01/23/evroparlamenty_krimea/.

³² “Annual Report about the Activities of the Security Police in 2013” (Riga: Security Police, 2014), p. 10.

Serbia that featured politicians from the ultranationalist Serbian Movement Dveri and national-conservative Democratic Party of Serbia.



American observer Gilbert Doctorow at the Simferopol airport

Gilbert Doctorow is a co-founder of the American Committee for East-West Accord and a regular contributor to the fiercely pro-Kremlin and anti-Semitic Russia Insider website. Doctorow was involved in attempts to bring together far-right and far-left pro-Kremlin activists.

Foreign observation of the presidential election in Crimea as propaganda

Since the Russian presidential election in Crimea was not considered legitimate by the international community in general, it is viable to suggest that, by sending foreign observers to Crimea, the Kremlin pursued two objectives. The first objective was to provide a sense of legitimacy to the presidential election in Crimea for the domestic, i.e. Russian, as well as Crimean audience. Since foreign observers (including those from established and reputable organisations) monitored the presidential election across Russia, they had to be also present in Crimea, in order to show that it was not different from “other Russian regions”. In this case, the “quality”, i.e. credibility and integrity, of the “Crimean observers” was not important for the Kremlin. The second objective was alluded to by Leonid Slutsky when he said that the voice of foreign observers, who advocated the legitimacy of “Crimea’s reunification with Russia”, would be heard in the international community.³³ What he implied was that foreign observers would attempt to legitimise the annexation of Crimea in their home countries and internationally.

The pursuit of both objectives relied heavily on the media coverage of the activities of foreign observers in Crimea. Quite expectedly, in stark contrast to electoral observers from established monitoring organisations, “Crimean observers” started giving complimentary comments on the electoral process not only before the voting officially finished at 8pm, but even before the election day.

Speaking to the Russian media on the 16th of March, Lars Peder Bjørndal Hollænder, who had observed elections in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyz Republic as part of the OSCE ODIHR election observation missions in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively, implicitly praised the upcoming election, as he said that he came to Crimea “to personally make sure that the electoral process was fair and transparent”.³⁴ Also on the 16th

³³ Laru, Galanina, “Krym ne ostavyat bez nablyudeniya”.

³⁴ “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli rasskazali, zachem priekhali v Krym”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 16 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/society/20180316/1114038754.html>.

of March, i.e. two days before the Election Day, Johan Bäckman claimed that the electoral process went fine: “I can say that the elections are extremely transparent. [...] The elections are well organised. [...] Everything is organised in a positive way, I do not see any problems”.³⁵

Political agenda of the foreign observation in Crimea was also notable in the comments of electoral monitors on the eve of the Election Day. One of the political messages was an argument that Russia-annexed Crimea was peaceful. Thus, Elias Demetriou claimed that “the situation in Crimea [was] calm” and that “the peninsula [was] ready for the Russian presidential election”.³⁶ Marco Marsili, who had participated in the OSCE ODIHR election observation missions in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyz Republic in 2016 and 2017 respectively, argued that he was going to Crimea “without worries, as [he] knew that it [was] absolutely safe” there. He added that the situation in Crimea was “peaceful and calm”.³⁷ In his turn, Hendrik Weber alleged that the international community presented Russia as a bogeyman, but that was wearing off.³⁸



French observers Éric Doligé (left) and Jacques Myard (right) at Simferopol airport.

Jacques Myard also made it clear that that the trip of the French delegation to Crimea was something more than just the electoral observation, as he suggested that visiting polling stations in all Crimea’s regions was related to their objective “to bring balance to the relations between Europe and Russia”.³⁹

On the Election Day, the narratives pushed by the foreign observers shifted towards the claims that the turnout was high and that there was a correlation between the presumably high turnout at the presidential election and the alleged legitimacy of the “referendum” in 2014.

In their comments to the Russian media, Alexander Grönlund and Nishan Selvaraj highlighted the high turnout, while Grönlund also presumed that the voters were happy and that the election was legitimate.⁴⁰ Long queues at polling stations were “a welcome surprise” for Diana Lutsker, who said that the election looked like a festive occasion.⁴¹ Andreas Maurer directly linked the alleged high turnout to the “referendum”, as he said that the presidential election in 2018 “would once again affirm the choice made

³⁵ “Finskiy pravozashchitnik porabotaet nablyudatelem na vyborakh v Krymu”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 16 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180316/1114034584.html>.

³⁶ “V Sevastopol’ pribyla delegatsiya nablyudateley s Kipra”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 17 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180317/1114042851.html>.

³⁷ “Inostrannykh nablyudateley v Sevastopole zainteresoval Chernomorskiy flot”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 17 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180317/1114042756.html>.

³⁸ “Nablyudatel’ iz Norvegii rasskazal, zachem edet v Krym na vybory”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 14 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180314/1114012145.html>.

³⁹ “V Krym pribyli nablyudateli iz Evropy, Azii i SShA”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 17 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180317/1114044567.html>.

⁴⁰ “Inostrannye nablyudateli podelilis’ pervymi vpechatleniyami o vyborakh v Krymu”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 18 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180318/1114046870.html>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*



by the Crimean people at the 2014 referendum”.⁴² The same argument was voiced by Ikhlas Mohammad Tamim.⁴³

The foreign observers’ comments made after the voting finished were essentially the same they made before and during the Election Day.

Conclusion

The greater part of the international community does not recognise the “Russian status” of Ukraine’s Autonomous Republic of Crimea annexed by Russia in March 2014. Therefore, reputable monitoring organisations did not send any missions to observe the Russian presidential election in Crimea held on the 18th of March 2018.

Aiming to give domestic and international legitimacy to the election in Crimea, the Russian authorities invited, via a number of organisations, 43 foreign observers who obtained accreditation from the CEC and illegally travelled to Crimea to monitor the electoral process there. The CEC has not published a full list of the foreign observers in Crimea yet, but, out of 43 foreign observers, we have identified 35 of them. The analysis of the list of the identified observers shows that, while the majority of them have no political affiliation, 14 of them represent nearly all ideological convictions ranging from the far left through the centre-left and centre-right to the far right. At the same time, at least 12 of them have previously been engaged in pro-Kremlin activities aimed at promoting Moscow’s foreign policy interests that include, but are not limited to, the attempts to undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. The pro-Kremlin activities of particular foreign monitors involved participation in the observation of illegitimate electoral processes in Crimea and DNR, illegal visits to these Ukrainian territories, pro-Kremlin commentaries for the Russian state-controlled media, and promotion of the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests in their respective societies.

As the main objective of inviting foreign observers was giving legitimacy to otherwise illegitimate electoral process, Russian media actively spread propagandistic narratives of the invited foreign observers in the Russian and international media space.

In general, the foreign observation mission in Crimea fell short of the expectations of the Russian authorities, as they promised to bring more acting parliamentarians and politicians to Crimea to observe the presidential election. In March 2014, more than 30 foreign parliamentarians and politicians – predominantly representing European far-right parties and organisations – observed the Crimean “referendum”, but in 2018 the Russian authorities largely failed to mobilise them for the “Crimean cause”.

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⁴² “Na Zapade boyatsya vysokoy yavki v Krymu – nablyudatel’ iz Germanii”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 18 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180318/1114050737.html>.

⁴³ “Nablyudatel’ iz Afganistana: ya s uvazheniem otnoshus’ k vyboru krymchan”, *RIA Novosti Krym*, 18 March (2018), <http://crimea.ria.ru/society/20180318/1114052985.html>.