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Fraud Allegations Mar Public Chamber Elections

By Alexey Eremenko

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The Public Chamber has no legislative or executive authority, but the vote for the Kremlin-created body took an intensity seldom seen even in elections for actual state posts.

The first elections ever to be held for seats in the Public Chamber, a prominent advisory body, ended in a scandal this weekend as all opposition candidates were weeded out amid vote rigging allegations.

Unknown candidates dominated the list of winners, which pundits put down to an attempt by the Kremlin to transition the organization into a professional expertise body charged with providing feedback on legislative drafts.

But attempting to increase the number of professional experts while simultaneously decreasing the number of critics would do nothing good for the Public Chamber, which has been steadily losing clout for the past decade, analysts said.

"There is little doubt these elections were a sham," Yury Korgunyuk, a political analyst based in Moscow at think tank Indem, said Sunday.

The Public Chamber has no legislative or executive authority, but the vote for the Kremlin-created body took an intensity seldom seen even in elections for actual state posts.

More than 2.3 million people voted in online polls to select 43 chamber members in 14 categories, from health and sports to trade associations, according to organizers.

The list included independent candidates endorsed by opposition leaders, such as whistleblower Alexei Navalny.

Hopefuls from the "Navalny list" led the polls for days, but were eventually trounced by low-profile candidates who saw sudden surges in popularity among voters despite not having engaged in any public campaigning efforts, prompting cries of foul play.

Bots & Carousels

Some violations were confirmed: Election organizers kicked three candidates out of the race for having used bots to boost their votes, the Public Chamber said on its website on Friday.

It was confirmed that several other candidates had been promoted by state organizations that they are or have been affiliated with. They were permitted to remain in the race.

Opposition candidates also claimed that their rivals had bribed voters, or had used "carousel voting," whereby constituents cast multiple ballots.

"We are drafting appeals to the president [Vladimir Putin] and considering lawsuits," said losing candidate Grigory Melkonyants, who was featured on the "Navalny list."

Ironically, Melkonyants serves as deputy director of independent election monitoring organization Golos, which reported that there had been large-scale voter fraud during Russia's most recent presidential and parliamentary elections. Those were never officially confirmed.

Both the Public Chamber's press service and the state-affiliated Information Democracy Foundation, which organized the election, refrained from commenting and could not be reached by telephone or e-mail on Sunday.

Repeated requests for comment from a number of winning candidates were similarly unsuccessful.

The Moscow Times attempted to reach Kristina Potupchik, former spokeswoman for the Kremlin's notorious youth movement Nashi; consumer rights activist Vladimir Slepak, an ex-policeman and singer-songwriter best known for an anthem of support for Putin; and Vladimir Fisinin of the Russian Poultry Union, a unknown candidate who gathered 41,900 votes — three times more than either Russian film star Konstantin Raikin or television host Nikolai Drozdov, a household name.

Political analysts interviewed by the Moscow Times believed that vote rigging had taken

place, but were unsure of its scope.

Korgunyuk of Indem said the meddling was likely broad enough to purge all unwanted candidates, but Alexei Mukhin of the pro-Kremlin Center for Political Information was more cautious, saying only that a more thorough investigation was needed.

Only a quarter of the Public Chamber's 166 members are selected by the public; 40 others are appointed by Putin and the rest by regional Public Chambers in Russia's 83 provinces.

Pros, Not Critics

The Public Chamber was established by Putin in 2005 to facilitate public oversight over the authorities and aid their dialogue with civil society.

But skeptics have been saying for almost a decade that the largely impotent organization was really a cover for the Kremlin's attempts to decrease public control over the government.

Even the pro-government analyst Mukhin conceded the Public Chamber has devolved into an inefficient "talk fest."

But the Kremlin has attempted to revive it by bringing in a greater number of professionals from various fields capable of advising Russia's legislators, Mukhin said Sunday.

The State Duma has frequently been accused in recent years of pursuing quantity over quality, fast-tracking handfuls of bills without running them by professional communities or members of the general public.

While devoid of direct authority, the Public Chamber still has lobbying potential, which explains the interest in the vote, said Melkonyants of Golos.

"Given how our resources shrink, we are ready to use anything," he said.

Putin has been accused of cracking down on the opposition and civil society institutes following his return to the Kremlin in 2012. Opposition politicians have faced criminal cases they call fabricated, and rights groups have struggled with increased red tape and pressure from authorities.

A handful of opposition figures have previously been allowed to participate in the Public Chamber, but this is changing as the increasingly hard-shell Kremlin is combatting "national traitors," said Korgunyuk of Indem.

Putin blasted disruptive "national traitors" during a speech before lawmakers in December. He never identified them, but many experts and politicians interpreted the term as a reference to the opposition.

"We are not so far gone as to shoot 'traitors' in the streets, but they are not allowed on the Public Chamber anymore either," Korgunyuk quipped sardonically.

Contact the author at a.eremenko@imedia.ru

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