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As Russia's Constitution Reform Vote Kicks Off, Election Watchdog Decries 'Manipulative' Process

In an interview with The Moscow Times, Grigory Melkonyants of the Golos election monitor said the vote is set to be the "least transparent" in years.

By Evan Gershkovich

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Voting kicked off Thursday morning and runs through July 1. **Peter Kovalev / TASS**

During a company-wide meeting this month at Moscow-region state-run television station Yegoryevsk Today, the chief editor issued a directive. Staffers were to de-register from the polling stations where they usually vote and re-register at the one in the town of Yegoryevsk.

"There you can do what you wish, but tomorrow you need to be on my list," a woman who is purportedly the editor can be heard telling her staff — some of whom grumble audibly — in a

recording sent to the independent election monitoring organization Golos, or Voice. "There may be various consequences, I'm just warning you. Especially during a pandemic: no bonus, no job."

"We all live under this government and sometimes we have to step on our own throats," she adds.

On Thursday, polls opened nationwide for a vote on amendments to Russia's Constitution, one of which could hand President Vladimir Putin, who was first elected in 2000, the opportunity to remain in office until 2036. Voting on the package of amendments — yes or no to all — will run through Wednesday, July 1, which Putin has declared a national holiday to allow Russians to head to polling stations throughout the day.

But ahead of the referendum, which needs more than 50% yes votes to pass the amendments, Golos warned that the voting procedure may not be entirely free.

In an interview this week, Grigory Melkonyants, a co-chairman of the group, described the vote as the "most manipulative" and "least transparent" in the country's history — aside from elections during the initial rocky years after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

"We've never had this many complaints from people telling us they are being pressured to vote," Melkonyants said, referring to a common practice ahead of elections in Russia, which is nonetheless forbidden by law.

Related article: Explainer: What Are Russians Voting for in Putin's Constitution Poll?

Evidence that companies are mobilizing their employees ahead of the vote has surfaced in recent days, including complaints from librarians at state-run libraries in St. Petersburg and doctors treating coronavirus patients in Arkhangelsk in Russia's north and Vladivostok in the Far East, as The Moscow Times reported earlier this week.

Not only are companies mobilizing their employees to vote, they are also working to track them to ensure that they have voted, as appears to be the case with Yegoryevsk Today.

This week, Reuters found a scheme assigning QR codes to people lured to register to vote by the opportunity to win a car or an apartment in a polling station raffle, while the Meduza news website reported that some companies are getting the QR codes not just from voluntary raffle signups, but by uploading a list of their employees to a website.

A high turnout would improve the already high chances of the constitutional overhaul passing, analysts say. According to pre-referendum polling by the state-run VtSIOM pollster, between 67 and 71% of Russians support the amendments.

In stark opposition to Melkonyats, head of the Central Election Commission Ella Pamfilova told the state-run Rossiya 24 television channel this week that the commission has "never had this few complaints" ahead of a vote.

Question marks

In addition to voter coercion, Melkonyants laid out a list of factors he said will leave a "big question mark" hovering over the results of the vote next week.

The main ones, he said, concern the authorities using the pandemic "to their advantage."

By spreading out the vote over seven days and allowing at-home and electronic voting — all ostensibly to limit coronavirus infections by thinning out crowds at polling stations — the authorities are limiting independent observers' abilities to track voter fraud, Melkonyants said.

As most observers are volunteers, many will have to ask their employers for time off. Melkonyants said those that work at state-run companies have reported having their requests denied.

If the volunteers do manage to get to polling stations, he said it will be difficult to see if voters are voting for themselves or "stuffing the ballot under the guise of someone else."

"Mask-wearing and social-distancing guidelines means observers won't be able to verify a voter's identity," Melkonyants said.

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Then there is the fact that ballots will be kept at polling stations overnight.

"This leaves a dark zone in which we won't know what is happening," Melkonyants said. "It opens up the possibility for mass tampering."

On top of this, observers this time around — unlike in past elections — are not being allowed to freely visit whichever polling stations they please, instead having to wait for approval from local election commissions specifying an allotted polling station.

Moreover, the Central Election Commission will not be requiring video recording at each polling station that observers can later check for possible fraud. Nor will it be publishing voter data for specific polling stations.

"The motivation in my mind is to make the voting maximally non-transparent," Melkonyants said. "This very seriously influences our trust in the results."

Right on cue, after polls opened on Thursday, a journalist with the independent Dozhd television channel reported that he had managed to vote twice — first at his polling station, then online.

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Aside from all these concerns, Melkonyants also noted that a flaw is built into the referendum itself: the bundling of completely unrelated amendments — from writing God into the

Constitution to defining marriage as heterosexual to enshrining social protections like a guaranteed minimum wage — together as one yes-or-no vote.

If the purpose of a vote is to determine the will of the electorate, this clouds the authorities' ability to do so, he said.

"A person might want to vote yes to one amendment but no to another," Melkonyants said.

Critics have said that the numerous amendments are a smoke screen to obscure the fact that the main purpose of the referendum is to give Putin the opportunity to run for president again in 2024 and 2030.

Notably, ahead of the vote, the authorities have focused on advertising all amendments but that one.

Opposition plans

For all of these reasons, Russia's most prominent Kremlin critic and de facto opposition leader Alexei Navalny has called on his supporters to boycott the vote — adding even more likelihood the reforms will pass easily.

"Voting on the amendments is illegal, meaningless and dangerous to the health of you and your loved ones," Navalny wrote on his blog earlier this month.

Although new daily coronavirus infections remain in the thousands and outbreaks are growing in some regions, Russia has mostly lifted its lockdown restrictions. Critics have said that the reason is to make sure that the Kremlin can push through the constitutional overhaul before discontent over its coronavirus response gains momentum.

According to the latest polling by the independent Levada Center, Putin's approval rating has fallen to 59%, its lowest ever. Last month, the group's deputy director Denis Volkov cited dissatisfaction over Russia's economic response to the pandemic as the main reason for the drop. That discontent could fester if economic recovery is protracted.

Related article: The Kremlin Is Working Overtime to Promote the New Constitution — Just Not the 'Putin Forever' Part

In an interview on the eve of the vote, Ivan Zhdanov, head of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, told The Moscow Times that the group is unlikely to call people to street protests — one of its common tools — no matter next week's results.

Although he believes Putin's falling ratings and people's growing anger will be compounded by the feeling of being "lied to" by a dishonest constitutional vote, he added that the group is playing the long game.

"This vote isn't some important event to focus on," he said. "Putin was always going to find a way to stay in power past 2024. The question was just how."

"It's an illusion that we could go and vote no," Zhdanov added, predicting that the result will

end up being in the range of 75% for to 25% against.

That result, accordingly to political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann, could see widespread calls of fraud among the Russian public.

“It will be almost impossible for the organizers of the voting to sell it as a political win,” she said. “If the vote goes through by 55%, it will be tantamount to losing and will be a hit to the political authority of the regime. If it goes through by 70%, it will be perceived as a result of mass falsification.”

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