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Deripaska-Linked Firms Sent Thousands to Moscow On Election Day. Some Said They Were On Standby for a Pro-Kremlin Rally.

Around 11,000 employees came to the capital for an online conference covering topics from family values to geopolitics.

By Pjotr Sauer and Jake Cordell

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The conference ended with a private concert at a stadium in Moscow. **Instagram / nikolai_lysenkov93**

Thousands of employees from companies linked to sanctioned oligarch Oleg Deripaska were dispatched to Moscow for a business trip on the final day of voting in Russia's parliamentary elections, and some of them told The Moscow Times they were expected to be on standby for a pro-government rally in the capital.

Several enterprises partly owned or controlled by Deripaska, once Russia's richest man and

who has been referred to as President Vladimir Putin's "favorite industrialist," sent staff to the capital for an education and self-development program dubbed the "Moscow Forum."

Hosts from the Rusal aluminum giant, which organized the event, told attendees 11,000 people attended. Through interviews with more than a dozen participants and tracking social media posts, The Moscow Times has learned how employees were bussed and flown to Moscow in the early hours of Sunday Sept. 19 — the final day of voting in Russia's controversial State Duma elections — from as far away as Siberia.

During the four-day trip, employees stayed in chic four-star hotels in the capital, watched online lectures on topics from gender relations and family values to nation building and geopolitics and participated in quest excursions. The Moscow Forum, which Rusal did not advertise or announce outside the company, was capped off with a private concert at a stadium in central Moscow.

In interviews, three forum attendees from different companies said their superiors told them they would also be expected to attend a political rally during their time in Moscow. Another four said that while they had not been personally ordered to attend a rally, rumors that the trip had a political angle and that they could be called upon to attend a pro-government protest in Moscow were swirling in their factories. The Moscow Times has withheld their surnames.

In a statement to The Moscow Times, a spokesman for Rusal's workers' councils — quasi-labor unions inside each plant — said Deripaska attended the final day of the forum, and that it was an educational conference organized by them. The statement did not respond to claims that workers were expected to participate in a political rally.

"The forum was a series of training events on various topics — from the production system that Oleg Deripaska introduced at his enterprises to lectures on economics, medicine and artificial intelligence. Such events are held regularly — this is a tradition laid down by the company founder," Sergei Filipov, chairman of the Rusal workers' councils said in the statement.

Representatives of Deripaska himself did not respond to a request for comment.

Kremlin critics and election watchdogs have in the past accused the Russian authorities of mobilizing workers at large corporations to participate in pro-government demonstrations and rallies.

In the end, no demonstration took place, as the ruling United Russia party won the vote with a commanding majority, and despite widespread allegations of fraud, ballot-stuffing and voter coercion, Russia's opposition did not take to the streets in large-scale protests.

"A rally was planned," said Sergei, who came to Moscow from Dzerzhinsk, a city about 400 kilometers east of Moscow which is also Deripaska's hometown. "But it was canceled because of the weather."

"The actual purpose of the forum was never — and still isn't — clear," he added.

"My manager said that it might be necessary to support United Russia after the elections,"

said another forum attendee, Nadezhda, who works at a Rusal plant in the Sverdlovsk region.

“In the end we didn’t have to, and nothing was said about it during the conference. I’m not particularly interested in politics and didn’t want to have to go to a rally — so that worked out.”

The forum was organized by Rusal, a company founded by Deripaska and majority-owned by EN+. Deripaska owns a 45% stake in EN+ after he reduced his holding in 2018 as part of a deal with the U.S. Treasury department to remove sanctions on the metals giant and pledged to cease exercising day-to-day control over the company.

Deripaska was the most prominent oligarch hit by Western sanctions following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. At the time, the U.S. Treasury Department highlighted Deripaska’s own statements that “he does not separate himself from the Russian state.”

Employees from other Deripaska-controlled enterprises, including those in the GAZ automotive conglomerate, also attended Moscow Forum, and there were reports that they too would be expected to protest.

In Yaroslavl, for instance, workers from the Yaroslavl Motor Company, a GAZ subsidiary, told local Communist Party deputy Yevgeniya Ovod they were being sent to Moscow to be ready to join a pro-government rally.

“Workers told me the instructions they had to follow during their trip to Moscow, the hotels they would stay in, the buses that would transport them and their daily schedule — it was all organized by the company,” Ovod told The Moscow Times.

In a video posted online, Ovod interviewed dozens of workers from the plant boarding a special train to Moscow in the early hours of Sept. 19, who said they were going on a work trip to attend a protest in Moscow.

Flights, coaches and trains

Employees described a hastily organized large-scale conference in Moscow, without a clear agenda or business purpose.

The vague program and last-minute invitations, combined with some employees being directly told about plans for a pro-Kremlin rally, fueled their suspicions the forum had been put together to provide a pretext for thousands of potential protestors to be in Moscow when the parliamentary election results were announced — a moment that could have triggered anti-government protests in the capital.

According to the forum participants who spoke to The Moscow Times, as well as social media posts from employees at Rusal and other companies, staff traveled to Moscow on the morning of Sunday, Sept. 19, as the final day of voting in Russia’s nationwide elections was underway. Flights left from at least four cities — Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Yekaterinburg and Krasnodar. Others traveled to Moscow on coach trips from their factories or special trains from cities closer to Moscow, including Nizhny Novgorod and Yaroslavl.

Some employees said they only found out about the trip three weeks before it happened.

“We were left in the dark about what the conference would be about until the very end. Getting on the bus to Moscow I still did not understand why we were going there,” said Anna, a worker at the Vyksa Steel Works, 300 kilometers outside Moscow.

In Moscow, they stayed in four-star hotels, including the $250-a-night Marriott Grand, the $140-a-night Marriott Courtyard, and other central hotels run by chains like Radisson and Sheraton. Meals and expenses were covered by the company.

“Moscow is beautiful under any pretext. Plus a luxury four-star hotel, three meals a day, a double room for me alone with a huge bed,” said Pavlina, an employee at Zavod Korpusov, a subsidiary of Derpiaska’s GAZ group.

Attendees, lots of whom work on factory assembly lines, said there were few guidelines as to who could attend.

“In our company, they asked us all: ‘You, do you want to go? Ok, you’re in, let’s go.’ It didn’t matter whether you were a manager or worker,” said Sergei, who works at a Rusal aluminum smelter in the Siberian city of Sayanogorsk.

In other factories, all workers who had been vaccinated were allowed to travel to Moscow, said Dmitry, who works at a Rusal plant near Yekaterinburg.

“Everybody went. Our manager positioned it like we were the best employees of the company, but they took everybody who had been vaccinated, and even those who were unvaccinated with a negative PCR test,” said Pavlina.

In total, some 11,000 people attended the forum, participants told The Moscow Times, citing information given to them by the organizers.

Ahead of the trip, staff were required to download a mobile application made specifically for the conference. Some participants were told the purpose of the trip was to test the new app, and that they should upload photos of their guided quests and excursions around Moscow.

“Officially the purpose of the trip was ‘corporate training.’ We were testing this new online platform. We had to listen to 15 lectures and complete six quest excursions,” said Pavlina. “But there were lots of rumors that there would be a rally in support of United Russia.”

Four of the apps employees were told to download are currently available on the Apple App store — SiberiaGo, UralGo, VolgaGo and KubanGo — with names referring to four regions Moscow Forum attendees came from. According to Apple data, they were uploaded just three days before the conference on Sept. 16. The apps can be downloaded but can’t be used without login details.

Family values and color revolutions

Despite the journey to Moscow, the educational part of the forum was held online, attendees said.

“We had three days of lectures on family development, healthy lifestyle, gender relations, physical education, national development projects — usual everyday topics,” said attendee Sergei, who said there was no political component to the conference.

Attendees were sent a link to the lectures, which were broadcast on YouTube, through the app they had been required to download. Many of the lectures, available on a private YouTube channel, covered nationalist or conservative topics.

Session titles included “National Conservation: Family Values,” “Russian Project: Civilizational Code,” “Map of World Power: Who are our Allies and Enemies?” and “Color Revolutions as a Technology for the Destruction of Traditional Civilizations,” according to videos The Moscow Times accessed online and an agenda posted by participants on social media.

“The lectures were incomprehensible to me,” said Sergei. “These topics are not interesting to me and are not useful either for my career or my daily life.”

In Yaroslavl, Ovod also said workers were confused by the program.

“Many complained that they had to download this special mobile app. And they didn’t understand why they had to listen to lectures that had nothing to do with their work. It made no sense to them.”

Alongside lectures, attendees also completed self-guided quest-excursions around Moscow, visiting a host of tourist attractions including Red Square, the Tretyakov Gallery, the VDNKh exhibition park, the Moscow City business district and Zaryadye Park. Participants uploaded photos from their tours to the app, which tracked their progress.

The forum concluded on Wednesday Sept. 22 — three days after the end of the elections — with a private concert in the VTB Arena, the home of Dinamo Moscow football club, featuring popular rock bands Bi-2 and Chaif, and the Kuban national choir.

Attendees told The Moscow Times this was the first time they had come to Moscow for a training event of this type. Other public information about initiatives launched by Rusal’s workers’ councils focuses on local ecological projects or workshops more closely tied to factory working conditions.

First trip

Large businesses in Russia — including Rusal — have a history of campaigning and supporting the government’s agenda, particularly in elections, experts say.

“Big businessmen who depend on the state and the external environment and rules behave in exactly the same way as the heads of budgetary institutions or companies with state participation — this turns them into quasi-private businesses,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, head of the domestic politics program at Carnegie Moscow Center.

That Deripaska-linked enterprises could go further, and be prepared to bring thousands of employees to Moscow to be on standby for a pro-Kremlin rally, was not seen as a surprise.

Ahead of the vote, local media outlets obtained audio recordings of Rusal bosses at some plants instructing divisional heads on how to get workers to vote for United Russia.

“Deripaska believes that closeness to Putin's circle and readiness to serve is a kind of political protection from possible political risks. He’s more vulnerable and thus more dependent on the political situation. Because of this, he has to invest more into some political moves to prove to the Kremlin that he’s ready to fight for its priorities,” said political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya.

“He behaves in a way that Putin really likes. And Deripaska worships Putin, he looks at him like he’s a god. He’s ready to demonstrate his complete willingness to do anything Putin wants. It’s a special case,” added Stanovaya.

Awareness of the possibility they could be called upon to protest varied among attendees.

For most, whatever the purpose, this was an exciting, if strange, trip to the capital.

“It was indescribable — my first ever time in Moscow, and even nicer to be able to participate in the Moscow Forum,” said Tamara Rykova, a representative of the Rusal youth council at a plant in Irkutsk.

“The most striking thing was seeing myself and my colleagues on the big screens among an audience of 11,000 during the concert at the VTB Arena. I got goosebumps!”

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