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Fraud, Violations and Pressure: Election Observers Describe Russian 2024 Presidential Vote

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Election officials seen counting votes in the March 15-17 presidential vote. **Erik Romanenko / TASS**

MOSCOW — More than a dozen election observers who spoke to The Moscow Times reported widespread voting infractions in Russia's 2024 presidential race, including falsifications of the final results and violations of election rules.

In the lead-up to the March 15-17 vote, there was little doubt that incumbent President Vladimir Putin would secure a fifth term in office as all of his major opponents have been forced into exile, imprisoned or have died.

With election officials saying that 87.28% of the votes went to the Kremlin strongman, Putin can now claim that the nation fully backs him as president, as well as his war on Ukraine.

But experts argue that millions of the votes cast for Putin were likely manipulated to

guarantee his victory during the three-day voting period — a newly introduced format that critics warned could make it easier to falsify results.

His rivals, who were widely seen as handpicked placeholders, received a marginal number of votes, according to the results from Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC). Communist candidate Nikolai Kharitonov came second with 4.31% of the vote, while New People's Vladislav Davankov and nationalist Leonid Slutsky pulled in 3.85% and 3.20% respectively.

Seventeen election observers from Moscow, St. Petersburg and Russia's regions described to The Moscow Times violations of varying severity at their polling stations, where they monitored both the voting and the vote-counting process.

The CEC said it has no information about cases where voting results were declared invalid. But of the 17 election observers interviewed by The Moscow Times, 11 said that violations at their polling stations led them to question the vote-counting results.

In some cases, election observers described blatant falsification of the results, as well as cases when the names of the candidates and their results were mixed up "by mistake."

Six observers said they believed that the voting results at their polling stations were counted correctly. Still, they reported witnessing mistakes in election procedures.

Falsification

In the Russian capital, two election observers told The Moscow Times about falsification they witnessed at their polling stations, saying that local election commissions, which oversee the voting process, recorded incorrect results in the final tally.

Related article: Russian Presidential Vote an 'Imitation,' Election Watchdog Golos Says

Artyom Guselnikov, who worked as an observer at Moscow polling station No. 205 on Saturday and Sunday, said that after the polls closed, observers and election commission members "counted the ballots" and "agreed on the results" — but the commission ended up not putting those results in the final tally and "waited for around an hour."

Then, "after a phone call to an election observer from Russia's Civic Chamber," the election commission "faked" results in the final tally, ignoring observers who were present at the polling place and who had the right to check the results, Guselnikov said.

Guselnikov, who filed an official complaint regarding the results at polling station No. 205, said that 152 votes for Putin were added and 37 votes were taken from Davankov — the candidate who was considered as an "alternative" for some opposition-minded Russians given his support for starting peace negotiations with Ukraine.

Similarly, Moscow election observer Alyona said that election commission members at her polling station refused to immediately record the results after all votes were counted.

"After around two hours," the commission changed the results, adding votes for Putin and "stole" votes from Davankov, said Alyona, who asked that her surname be withheld.

According to her, 70 votes were taken from Davankov and 88 votes were added to Putin at the polling station where she was an observer.

“I asked them to recount the ballots and said it’s a criminal offense [to fake the votes]. No one reacted to me and I called the police,” Alyona said.

She called the police twice regarding the falsification, but no officers ever arrived at the polling place.

However, two higher-level election officials came to the polling station, locked themselves in a room with the polling station commission members and discussed the results.

“It seems as if they wanted to correct [the results] but they failed — it turned out that there were more ballots from the ballot boxes in total than were originally issued to the [election] commission,” she said. “They recounted the invalid ballots, recounted something else…but they couldn’t match the numbers.”

“The two men also asked the commission deputy to show them his note with the original count and the numbers matched my calculations. They even read the numbers out loud to the entire commission, so everyone who wasn’t aware of what was going on realized that falsification had in fact taken place,” Alyona said.

“I wrote down those numbers they discussed and they matched with my calculations — Putin had 545, Davankov — 152,” she said.

Later, three women arrived and “asked the commission to sign a fake final vote count,” Alyona said.

The commission, Alyona said, also violated standard procedure during the vote-counting process. Instead of counting the votes sequentially, it divided all the ballots into groups and distributed them among seven commission members.

When Alyona tried to file a complaint, the commission head “refused to sign” it.

Related article: How the Kremlin Is Manipulating the 2024 Election

Critics say this kind of violation creates opportunities for falsification, making it harder for election observers to check individual ballots and the results themselves.

At least five election observers from St. Petersburg and three from the Moscow region told The Moscow Times that members of their local election commissions manipulated the results intentionally or put down “incorrect results by mistake.”

At polling station No. 723 in the Moscow region town of Ivanteyevka, “it seemed that everything was violated and failed to comply with the law,” election observer Polina Barinova told The Moscow Times, describing the vote counting process.

She and her colleague Fyodor Chernyshev, who worked as an observer at the same site, told The Moscow Times they were unable to properly verify how the commission counted the

ballots.

“While counting, they simply put a stack of ballots into the pile for Putin,” Chernyshev said, citing another observer at the site who was able to observe the incident.

Neither the commission head nor its other members announced which candidate’s votes were being counted as required by procedure, Chernyshev said. The voting results were also not announced after the counting, he added.

“Well, at least they didn’t wipe their asses with those ballots, as one of my friends said,” Chernyshev told The Moscow Times.

Barinova called the counting procedure “completely opaque.”

“If they have nothing to hide, why would they behave this way?”

Breaches of voting and counting regulations

At least three observers from St. Petersburg and the Moscow region said that while they did not witness outright falsification or ballot stuffing, they still questioned their polling stations’ results due to “procedural violations.”

One St. Petersburg observer, who requested anonymity, said she noticed that ballots stored in a locked safe overnight appeared to have been moved when the safe was opened on the final day of voting.

When she compared the photos of the safe from Saturday and Sunday and asked the commission to explain the different positioning of the ballots, she was ignored.

"I didn’t observe any ballot stuffing, but I have a suspicion that instead of stuffing, there might have been a replacement of ballot packages or an unauthorized opening of the safe," she said.

"What happened with the ballot packages, what happened with the ballots, only God knows.”

The observer said she was also barred from checking the opening of ballot packages and the list of voters.

"Perhaps everything is fine and fair there, but the procedural violations strongly cast doubt on this," she told The Moscow Times.

Alexei Golyshev, an observer from Mytishchi in the Moscow region, said he filed four official complaints regarding violations at his polling station.

"I can't definitively say whether the result was rigged because I can't be certain,” he said, but added that the election commission made it impossible to verify the accuracy of the count because members were checking the ballots simultaneously — a violation of election rules.

At least four election observers also told The Moscow Times they believe that voters who work for the state were forced to cast their ballots on the first day of the three-day vote, with some workers asking to take photos at the polling stations to send to their bosses.

Pressure

Out of 17 observers who spoke to The Moscow Times, only one stated that they had not faced any kind of pressure or been barred from checking the voting and vote-counting processes.

Ivan, an observer from Mytishchi, said "the commission behaved appropriately" and there was "cooperation," adding, however, there were "minor violations" at his polling station.

Others — like Danil Zimin, an observer from the city of Odintsovo — described being prevented from checking the vote-counting process by members of the local election commission.

Some observers said they were forced by commission members to stay in one spot at their polling stations, which made it harder to monitor the vote.

According to Golyshev, he was removed from the polling station for no apparent reason when the bags of ballots were opened.

Gusenkov and Alyona from Moscow said that election commission members even "threatened them" when they were trying to monitor their work.

"They told me that I'm disrupting the election, that I'll be detained and that I cannot film anything [at the station]," Alyona said.

"I didn't feel safe," she said.

Lack of knowledge

At least four observers who spoke to The Moscow Times also complained that members of the election commission lacked knowledge of Russian election laws.

"Most of the errors were not due to some hypothetical directive from above, but rather due to the commission members' complete lack of care. That isn't malicious intent, it's unprofessionalism — most of the violations are directly linked to this," said one observer from St. Petersburg, adding that "two candidates were swapped" at her station.

"The number of votes was correct, but they were put under the wrong names," she said, adding that she would file a complaint about what she described as "a mistake."

Zimin said the problem is that members of election commissions "are usually state workers, who don't want to do anything correctly or according to the rules, but just want to go home early."

"No one cares," he said.

Gleb, an election observer from the Moscow region, who asked not to share his surname, said that he was "shocked by the poor knowledge of the election commission members about the details of the election organization procedure."

"The fact that commissions act so arbitrarily and with a desire to speed up the process

diminishes transparency, creates potential for deliberate irregularities and results in counting errors," he told The Moscow Times.

“Even without fraud, the elections aren’t truly democratic.”

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