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Russians Were Asked to Vote on the New 500-Ruble Bill Design. It Became a Political Lightning Rod.

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It started with an innocuous call by the Central Bank to choose the design of Russia's new 500-ruble (about $5) note dedicated to the North Caucasus Federal District.

It ended in a spat between Chechen officials and pro-war bloggers, accusations of rupturing national unity and even claims of foreign meddling. And then there were all the memes.

Russia's Central Bank said late Sunday that it was canceling the vote after it reported "numerous attempts" to artificially inflate votes for certain images, while facing accusations of manipulating the results itself.

The Moscow Times looks at how the design for a new banknote became such a political lightning rod — and rounds up some of the best memes inspired by the contest:

What were people voting for?

The online vote, launched on Oct. 1, was meant to decide the design of the 500-ruble bill's front and back sides, with voters choosing from 16 of the North Caucasus Federal District's most famous landmarks.

Voters could initially cast their votes via social networks VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, email and the state services portal Gosuslugi.

Voting for the front side of the banknote had proceeded smoothly, with the Akademicheskaya Galereya — a 19th-century former resort built over a mineral spring in the Stavropol region city of Pyatigorsk — emerging as the clear favorite with over 1 million votes.

But the vote for the reverse side quickly turned contentious, with the Grozny-City skyscraper complex in Chechnya and Mount Elbrus, Europe's highest peak, emerging as the frontrunners.

What are Chechen authorities calling for?

Eager to see his republic's capital on the new currency, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov said Friday that anyone voting for Grozny-City on all available platforms could win one of 10 new iPhone 17s.

Popular Chechen blogger Askhab Tamaev went further, announcing a car giveaway for supporters of the skyscraper complex.

The next day, the Central Bank restricted voting to Gosuslugi in an apparent effort to prevent multiple votes. Each Gosuslugi account is linked to a single passport.

The decision sparked outrage from Chechen officials, and local state TV channels began broadcasting instructions on how to vote for Grozny-City via Gosuslugi.

In a video address, Akhmed Dudayev, Chechnya's information and national policy minister, voiced disappointment that the voting rules had been changed mid-process and urged the Central Bank not to give in to "provocateurs, foreign agents, rabble and liberal circles."

"Dear friends at the Central Bank, if you're unhappy with how fast our votes are growing, if you don't like that we're leading this vote, just tell us," Dudaev said. "Explain that you'd prefer another option to take the lead — and then we can talk."

In the video, shared by Kadyrov and major Chechen media outlets, Dudayev slammed the Central Bank's "dishonest and unfair" decision and urged its employees to answer calls from angry Chechen citizens.

Who is campaigning for Elbrus?

In response to the Chechen campaign, a group of right-wing bloggers led by Vladislav Pozdnyakov — the founder of the now-banned ultra-nationalist group Male State — urged their followers to rally behind the Mount Elbrus design.

Pozdnyakov accused Chechen officials of inflating votes, claiming that "90% of the votes are simply bots," and said that the Central Bank "made the vote unfair."

He called on his 536,000 Telegram followers to vote for Elbrus, saying: "Today we need the support of everyone who values national unity and respects the equality of all before the laws and the constitution of our country!"

Vyacheslav Davankov, deputy speaker of the State Duma and head of the New People party, also encouraged votes for Elbrus, raffling off a resort trip for two near the mountain as an incentive.

Chechen officials then announced plans to petition President Vladimir Putin regarding the vote, claiming that a "disgusting campaign of hatred against the Chechen people" had unfolded online.

"If the Central Bank allows a symbol to appear on the new banknote that wins not through fairness but through money and hatred, it will strike at the very idea of a multiethnic Russia," Dudayev said Sunday.

"This will not just be a shame for the contest — it will be a warning signal for the entire country."

'A federation divided'

Some observers criticized the Central Bank for holding the vote in the first place, arguing that it was an attempt to sow discord between Russia's regions and "tear the federation apart" or even a form of foreign intelligence interference.

Pro-war correspondent Dmitry Steshin urged counterintelligence to investigate the Central Bank's actions, claiming that its initiative was creating a national rift between Russians and Chechens and was either the result of "officials' narrow-mindedness" or the work of Russia's enemies.

Daniil Bessonov, another pro-war blogger whose Neofitsialny Bessonov Telegram channel has around 300,000 subscribers, suggested the Central Bank issue banknotes or coins featuring soldiers who fought in Ukraine if it "has spare funds and time for changes."

Even the Wagner Group Telegram channel, which posts updates about the mercenary outfit, weighed in: "It's important to understand that there are forces interested in provoking outrage within our society. Remember the most important thing: no matter which image is ultimately chosen for the new banknotes, we must remain united."

Vote canceled

On Sunday, the Central Bank announced that it had canceled the public vote altogether.

"We have encountered numerous attempts to artificially increase the number of votes for certain options using technical means. This makes it impossible to produce an objective result," the statement said.

The Bank added that new voting dates would be announced separately and that the list of possible designs would stay the same.

“Based on an analysis of all voting channels, we will propose new conditions that will eliminate the possibility of dishonest practices,” the regulator said.

By Saturday evening, Grozny-City had received 1,038,248 votes, while Mount Elbrus led with 1,078,416 votes.

The controversy over the banknote vote inspired an outpouring of memes and humorous proposals for the new design:

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