

FOREIGN OBSERVATION OF THE ILLEGITIMATE ELECTIONS IN SOUTH OSSETIA AND ABKHAZIA IN 2019

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Edition:

European Platform for Democratic Elections
www.epde.org

Responsible for the content:

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10999 Berlin, Germany

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EPDE is financially supported by the European Union



and the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.



The here expressed opinion does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the donors.

Executive summary

The so-called “Republic of South Ossetia” and “Republic of Abkhazia” are breakaway regions of Georgia that are recognised as independent sovereign states only by five UN Member States: Russia (which supports their *de facto* independence by military, economic and political means), Nauru, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela. Other entities that recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states are territories occupied by Russian forces (Transnistria, Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic), as well as Nagorno-Karabakh.

As the international community overwhelmingly considers any “elections” in these regions as illegitimate, no established election monitoring organisation would send its mission to observe “elections” in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia.

In order to give international legitimacy to the “elections”, the “authorities” of South Ossetia and Abkhazia organised their own “international monitoring”. The people they invited to observe the “elections” can be divided into three groups: (1) official representatives of the countries that recognise their sovereignty and independence, (2) representatives of the pseudo-states largely controlled by Russia, and (3) foreign individuals known for their previous involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts and coming mostly from far-right parties, organisations and movements.

These pro-Kremlin efforts include but are not limited to: (1) previous participation in politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions in Russia and elsewhere; (2) legitimisation and justification of Russia’s actions aimed at undermining the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine; (3) cooperation with pro-Kremlin propaganda resources; (4) criticism of the European sanctions imposed on Russia in relation to its aggression



"Foreign observers" at the meeting with South Ossetian "president" Anatoliy Bibilov and "foreign minister" Dmitriy Medoev: (left to right) Kris Roman, Stefano Bonilauri, Dmitriy Medoev, Enrico Corsi, Matteo Pressi, Anatoliy Bibilov, Gunnar Norbert Lindemann, Johan Bäckman, Mitsuhiro Kimura, unidentified associate of Kimura.

Source: <http://cominf.org/node/1166523297>

towards Ukraine; and (5) membership in Western pro-Kremlin organisations, movements and groups.

The presence of "foreign observers" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was underpinned not by the actual need to observe the "elections", but rather by the intent to mimic legitimate international election monitoring in order to create an impression that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were legitimate independent states. Hence, the activities of "foreign observers" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia had nothing to do with the established principles and/or practices of international electoral observation.

Introduction: Illegitimacy of the South Ossetian “parliamentary” and Abkhaz “presidential” elections

On 9 June 2019, the so-called “Republic of South Ossetia” held “parliamentary elections”, while the so-called “Republic of Abkhazia” held “presidential elections” on 25 August and 8 September the same year. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia are internationally recognised as regions of Georgia. Among UN Member States, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are recognised as sovereign states only by Russia—which occupied these Georgian regions in 2008 and since then has supported their *de facto* independence by military, economic and political means—and by Nauru, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela.

On the day of the South Ossetian “parliamentary elections”, Georgia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) declared that the “elections” blatantly violated “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. Any so-called elections held in the occupied territories are illegal and cannot have any legal effect, as they are in contradiction with the fundamental norms and principles of international law”.¹

1 “The Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on the So-called Parliamentary Elections in Occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia*, 9 June (2019), [http://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganck-\(49\).aspx](http://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganck-(49).aspx).

On 10 June, the US Embassy in Georgia issued a statement saying that the US did not recognise “elections” in South Ossetia and would not acknowledge their outcome. The statement also expressed “strong support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders” and urged “Russia to fulfill all of its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire agreement, including withdrawal of its forces to pre-conflict positions, reversal of its recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and provision of free access for humanitarian assistance to these regions”.² In its own statement, the Delegation of the European Union to the Council of Europe and International Organisations in Vienna reiterated “its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders” and recalled that the EU does not recognise the constitutional and legal framework in which the South Ossetian “parliamentary elections” took place.³

Georgia’s MFA also issued a statement on the Abkhaz “presidential elections”. In that statement, which was similar to that on the South Ossetian “parliamentary elections”, the “presidential elections” were referred to as yet “another illegal act directed against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia”.⁴

After the first round of the Abkhaz “presidential elections”, 15 countries, namely Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the USA, issued a joint statement in which they declared that did not recognise the legitimacy of the so-called “presidential elections” and expressed their “full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders”.⁵ Moreover, on 5 September 2019, the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia declared that the “the decisions by the

- 2 “The U.S. Embassy Statement on De Facto ‘Elections’ in Georgia’s South Ossetia Region”, *U.S. Embassy in Georgia*, 10 June (2019), <https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-u-s-embassy-statement-on-de-facto-elections-in-georgias-south-ossetia-region-june-10/>.
- 3 “EUDEL Statement on the So-called Parliamentary Elections in the Georgian Breakaway Region of South Ossetia”, *Delegation of the European Union to the Council of Europe*, 20 June (2019), https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/council-europe/64417/eudel-statement-so-called-parliamentary-elections-georgian-breakaway-region-south-ossetia_en; “EUDEL Statement on the So-called Parliamentary Elections in the Georgian Breakaway Region of South Ossetia”, *Delegation of the European Union to the International Organisations in Vienna*, 20 June (2019), https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/vienna-international-organisations/64417/eudel-statement-so-called-parliamentary-elections-georgian-breakaway-region-south-ossetia_en.
- 4 “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on the So-called Presidential Elections in Occupied Abkhazia Region”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia*, 25 August (2019), [http://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganck-\(51\).aspx](http://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganck-(51).aspx).
- 5 “Joint Statement on So-called ‘Presidential Elections’ in Abkhazia”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia*, 26 August (2019), <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/64122-joint-statement-on-so-called-presidential>.

de facto authorities in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali to conduct the so-called ‘elections’ [went] against the continuing efforts to peaceful resolution of the conflict in Georgia”.⁶

6 “EU Statement on the Situation in Georgia Delivered at the OSCE Permanent Council Meeting in Vienna, 5 September 2019”, *Delegation of the European Union to Georgia*, 6 September (2019), https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/67004/eu-statement-situation-georgia-delivered-osce-permanent-council-meeting-vienna-5-september_en.

“Foreign observers” of the 2019 “elections” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia

As no established election monitoring organisation would agree to observe the illegitimate elections, the “authorities” of South Ossetia and Abkhazia attempted to organise their own “international monitoring”.

In the case of South Ossetia, it is not entirely clear how many “foreign observers” were present in the region on voting day. On 7 June 2019, the secretary of South Ossetian “Central Election Commission” (SO CEC) Kristina Avlokhova said that they issued accreditation to “around 50 observers” from Russia, Nicaragua, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Japan and Italy, as well as internationally unrecognised “states” such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), and Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR).⁷ However, on voting day, South Ossetian “foreign minister” Dmitriy Medoev reported that the SO CEC accredited 70 “foreign observers”.⁸ Using OSINT methods, we have identified 47 “foreign observers” present at the “parliamentary elections” in South Ossetia on 9 June 2019.

7 “Na vybory v Yuzhnyy Osetiyu akkreditovano okolo 50 nablyudateley”, *Res*, 7 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523176>.

8 “Akkreditovano 70 inostrannykh nablyudateley iz 15 stran, – glava MID”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523242>.



Italian "observers" enjoy a meal with South Ossetian "foreign minister" Dmitriy Medoev.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/corsi.enrico/posts/10217731428391584>



Italian "observers" Enrico Corsi and Matteo Pressi at the meeting with South Ossetian "president" Anatoliy Bibilov.

Source: <http://cominf.org/node/1166523297>

Table 1. Identified “foreign observers” at the 2019 “parliamentary elections” in South Ossetia.

Country	Name	Position/affiliation
Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh)	Semen Afıyan	Chief of staff at the “foreign ministry”
	Erik Arutyunyan	Member of the permanent foreign relations commission of the “national assembly”
	Artur Tovmasyan	Head of the “Motherland” group in the “national assembly”
Belgium	Kris Roman	“Euro-Rus” movement
Finland	Johan Bäckman	*unknown
Georgia (Abkhazia)	Venori Bebiya	Chair of the commission on culture, youth and sports of the “national assembly”
	Alias Brandziya	“Central election commission”
	Ashot Minosyan	“National assembly”
	Alan Elbakiev	“Ambassador” of Abkhazia in South Ossetia
Germany	Gunnar Norbert Lindemann	Alternative for Germany, member of the Berlin State Parliament
Italy	Stefano Bonilauri	Northern League, president of the Italy-Russia Cultural Association in Emilia Romagna
	Enrico Corsi	Northern League
	Matteo Pressi	Northern League, head of the cabinet of the chair of the Verona province
Japan	Mitsuhiro Kimura	Issuikai movement
Moldova (Transnistria)	Vitaliy Barbulat	“Central election commission”
	Vadim Doni	Commission on the development of business and manufacturing
	Vitaliy Kalin	Commission on legislation, law enforcement, defence, security, peace-making, defence of rights and freedoms of citizens
	Galina Shlenskova	“Central election commission”
Nicaragua	Melvin Agurcia	MP
Russia	Vadim Berdiev	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Elena Bibikova	MP, Federation Council
	Batradz Bilaonov	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Soslanbek Bitarov	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Vitaliy Cheldiev	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania

Country	Name	Position/affiliation
Russia	Boris Chernyshev	MP, State Duma
	Nadezhda Dakhova	Federation Council
	Yuriy Gabaraev	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Alan Gagloev	Member of the parliament of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Yuriy Kobzev	MP, State Duma
	Olga Kovitidi	MP, Federation Council
	Zhanna Morgoeva	Central Election Commission of the Republic of Northern Ossetia – Alania
	Aram Saakov	MP, State Duma
	Yuriy Smirnov	MP, State Duma
	Artur Taymazov	MP, State Duma
	Kazbek Taysaev	MP, State Duma
	Sergey Tsekov	MP, Federation Council
Ukraine (DPR)	Andrey Baevskiy	Chair of the commission on civil and arbitration legislation of the “people’s council”
	Irina Dianova	Deputy chair of the commission on the budget, finances and economic policies of the “people’s council”
	Aleksey Zhigulin	Chair of the commission on criminal and administrative legislation of the “people’s council”
	Maksim Knysh	Chair of the commission on constitutional legislation and state building of the “people’s council”
	Sergey Prokopenko	Member of the commission on ethics, procedures and workflow management
	Valeriy Skorokhodov	Head of the commission on agriculture and land resources of the “people’s council”
Ukraine (LPR)	Dmitriy Khoroshilov	Chair of the “people’s council”
	Denis Kolesnikov	Chair of the commission of the “people’s council” on international relations, communication, information policy and mass communications
	Denis Levin	Assistant at the “people’s council”
	Ekaterina Soroka	“Central election commission”
	Maksim Svidchenko	“Central election commission”

On 25 April 2019, Abkhaz “deputy foreign minister” Irakliy Tuzhba said that the “authorities” had invited “international observers”, including Members of

European Parliament, to monitor the “presidential elections”, originally scheduled for 21 July but postponed to 25 August.⁹ On 19 August, “deputy speaker of the Abkhaz parliament” Levon Galustyan promised that MPs from Germany and other European countries, as well as representatives of China, Russia, DPR, LPR, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh, would come to “observe” the “elections”.¹⁰ On the day of the first round of the “elections”, the “State News Agency of the Republic of Abkhazia” stated that in total 67 foreign “observers” would monitor the “elections”.¹¹

As the “election” held on 25 August failed to establish a winner, a second round was held on 8 September. According to Abkhaz “foreign minister” Daur Kove, 12 foreign “observers” monitored the second round.¹²

Using OSINT methods, we have identified 38 “foreign observers” present at the first round of the “presidential elections” in Abkhazia on 25 August 2019 (see Table 2), and 9 “observers” at the re-run of the “elections” on 8 September 2019 (see Table 3).

Table 2. Identified foreign “observers” at the first round of the “presidential elections” in Abkhazia

Country	Name	Position/affiliation
Austria	Patrick Poppel	Suvorov Institute
China	Ge Jili	*unknown
Georgia (South Ossetia)	Kristina Avlokhova	Chair of the “central election commission”
	Petr Gassiev	First vice speaker of the “parliament”
	Alan Dzhussoev	First deputy head of the “presidential administration”
Germany	Hartmut Hübner	<i>Russland.NEWS</i>
	Ludmila Hübner	<i>Russland.NEWS</i>
	Stefan Keuter	Alternative for Germany, MP, Bundestag
	Gunnar Norbert Lindemann	Alternative for Germany, member of the Berlin State Parliament

- 9 “Deputatov Evroparlamenta priglasili nablyudatelyami na vybory v Abkhazii”, *Sputnik Abkazia*, 25 April (2019), <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190425/1027190946/Deputatov-Evroparlamenta-priglasili-nablyudatelyami-vybory-Abkhazii.html>.
- 10 “Za vyborami v Abkhazii budut nablyudat’ predstaviteli Kitaya i stran Evropy”, *Regnum*, 19 August (2019), <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2693671.html>.
- 11 “Vybory Glavy gosudarstva prokhodyat v Abkhazii”, *Apsny Press*, 25 August (2019), <http://www.apsnypress.info/news/vybory-glavy-gosudarstva-prokhodyat-v-abkhazii/>.
- 12 Sariya Kvaratskheliya, “Vtoroy raund pozadi: chto izvestno o vyborakh prezidenta Abkhazii”, *Sputnik Abkhazia*, 9 September (2019), <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190909/1028392946/Vtoroy-raund-pozadi-chto-izvestno-o-vyborakh-prezidenta-Abkhazii-.html>.

Country	Name	Position/affiliation
Moldova (Transnistria)	Gregory Dyachenko	Member of the “supreme soviet”
	Grigore Mărăcuță	Member of the “supreme soviet”
	Alexander Stetsyuk	“Deputy foreign minister”
	Vladislav Zhuk	“First deputy justice minister”
Nicaragua	Alba Azucena Torres Mejia	Ambassador to Russia
Russia	Andrey Chernyshev	MP, State Duma
	Dmitriy Ionin	MP, State Duma
	Yuriy Kobzev	MP, State Duma
	Aleksey Kondratyev	MP, Federation Council
	Olga Kovitidi	MP, Federation Council
	Mikhail Kozlov	MP, Federation Council
	Farit Mukhametshin	MP, Federation Council
	Konstantin Zatulín	MP, State Duma
Slovakia	Ján Čarnogurský	Slovak-Russian Association; former prime minister of Slovakia
Ukraine (Crimea)	Yaroslav Ivanchenko	Director of the Business and Cultural Centre
	Georgiy Muradov	Deputy chair of the “council of ministers of the Republic of Crimea”
Ukraine (DPR)	Vladislav Berdichevskiy	Member of the “people’s council”
	Aleksandr Bykadorov	Member of the “people’s council”
	Konstantin Kuzmin	Member of the “people’s council”
	Vasily Pertsev	Member of the “people’s council”
	Natalya Pshenichnaya	Member of the “people’s council”
	Aleksandr Seryozhenko	Member of the “people’s council”
	Vladimir Vysotsky	Secretary of the “central election commission”
Ukraine (LPR)	Oleg Koval	Deputy chair of the “people’s council”
	Elena Kravchenko	Chair of the “central election commission”
	Anna Soroka	“Deputy foreign minister”
	Maksim Svidchenko	Deputy chair of the “central election commission”
	Yevgeniy Verkhovod	Assistant to “foreign minister”
Venezuela	Marlo Montilla	General director of technologies of the Central Election Commission

Table 3. Identified foreign observers at the second round of the “presidential elections” in Abkhazia

Country	Name	Position/affiliation
Georgia (South Ossetia)	Petr Gassiev	First vice speaker of the “parliament”
	Alan Dzhussoev	First deputy head of the “presidential administration”
Ghana	Sergey Chesnokov	Regional development fund
Russia	Aleksey Kondratyev	MP, Federation Council
	Farit Mukhametshin	MP, Federation Council
	Aleksandr Pilipenko	MP, Federation Council
Ukraine (DPR)	Aleksandr Bykadorov	Member of the “people’s council”
	Natalya Pshenichnaya	Member of the “people’s council”
	Aleksandr Seryozhenko	Member of the “people’s council”

Established involvement of “foreign observers” in pro-Kremlin efforts

As seen from the lists of the identified “observers” of the South Ossetian and Abkhaz “elections”, the majority of them represent either Russia or internationally illegitimate regimes in South Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea, DPR and LPR that Russia controls. However, many other “observers” have a record of previous involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts, including, but not limited to, (1) previous participation in politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions in Russia and elsewhere; (2) legitimisation and justification of the actions of the Russian Federation directed at undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; (3) cooperation with pro-Kremlin propaganda resources; (4) criticism of the European sanctions imposed on Russia in relation to its aggression towards Ukraine; and (5) membership in Western pro-Kremlin organisations, movements and groups.

Belgian far-right activist **Kris Roman** is the leader of the miniscule fringe “Euro-Rus”. He is a regular commentator for the pro-Kremlin media and participated in the “Donbass Struggle for Independence” roundtable held in the DPR in May 2016. In September 2017, **Roman** participated in the pro-Kremlin conference “1917-2017. Russia, Ukraine and the World” in Moscow. In November 2018, he took part in the anti-Western conference “Red Square/Molotov Club” in Moscow and “observed” the illegitimate “general elections” in the DPR.¹³

Johan Bäckman has been for several years engaged in a broad range of pro-Kremlin activities. In March 2014, he “observed” the illegitimate

13 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate ‘General Elections’ in the Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic in November 2018” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/Foreign-Observation-DPR-LPR.html>.



Belgian "observer" Kris Roman at the meeting with South Ossetian "president" Anatoliy Bibilov.

Source: <http://cominf.org/node/1166523297c>

"referendum" in Crimea that was followed by its annexation by Russia. In May 2014, **Bäckman** declared himself a representative of the DPR in Finland. He frequently travelled to the DPR and, in October 2016, "observed" the "primary regional elections" there. In March 2018, he "observed" the illegitimate Russian "presidential elections" in Crimea.¹⁴ For his blatant pro-Kremlin activities elsewhere, he was banned from entering Estonia and Moldova in 2009 and 2014, respectively. In October 2018, **Bäckman** received a 12-month suspended jail sentence for aggravated defamation and stalking of Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro who investigated pro-Kremlin Internet trolls.¹⁵

Stefano Bonilauri, **Enrico Corsi** and **Matteo Pressi** are members of the Italian far-right Northern League (or simply League) which opposes the EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine, and which signed a

14 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018" (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/foreign-observation-of-the-illegitimate-presidential-election-in-crimea-in-march-2018-1375.html>.

15 Andrew Higgins, "Pro-Russian Internet Trolls Jailed for Defamatory Comments about Finnish Journalist", *Independent*, 20 October (2018), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-trolls-jailed-defamatory-comments-finnish-journalist-jessikka-aro-a8593631.html>.



Kris Roman and Stefano Bonilauri "observing" the "elections".

Source: <http://www.emiliarussia.org/?p=868>

coordination and cooperation agreement with the ruling Russian party “United Russia” in 2017. **Bonilauri** is the former leader of the Italian far-right organisation “State and Power” (renamed “Patriotic Socialism”), which was ideologically inspired by Russian fascist Alexander Dugin, and organised the pro-Kremlin/DPR conference “Donbass: Russian Resistance in the Ukrainian War” in Italy in February 2015.¹⁶

The leader of the Japanese far-right Issuikai movement **Mitsuhiro Kimura** has been in contact with Russian ultranationalists at least since 2002. In 2010, he travelled to South Ossetia and Abkhazia to support their separatist activities. In March and August 2014, he illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea and met with representatives of the Russian occupying forces. In September that year, **Kimura** also observed the illegitimate “regional elections” in Crimea. In March 2018, he participated in the politically biased “observation” of the Russian presidential elections.¹⁷

16 “Terni, il punto sulla guerra ucraina nell’incontro di socialismo patriottico”, *Agenzia Stampa Italia*, 3 February (2015), <http://www.agenziastampaitalia.it/politica/politica-estera/23998-terni-il-punto-sulla-guerra-ucraina-nell-incontro-di-socialismo-patriottico>.

17 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/politically-biased-foreign-electoral-observation-at-the-russian-2018-presidential-election.html>.

Patrick Poppel is the general secretary of the small Austria-based pro-Kremlin Suvorov Institute. In 2006-2007, **Poppel** was a regular contributor to the Russian, fiercely anti-Western website *Katehon*, founded by the Russian ultranationalist businessman Konstantin Malofeev. In January 2018, **Poppel** co-hosted a visit of Russian fascist Alexander Dugin to Vienna. He also illegally entered Russia-annexed Crimea in March 2018 to monitor the Russian illegitimate “presidential election” and “observed” the illegitimate “general elections” in the DPR in November 2018.

Ge Jili presents himself as an “honorary consul” of Abkhazia in China and a member of the Coordination council of the International Association “Friends of Crimea”. He illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea several times in 2017-2019.

Hartmut Hübner and **Ludmila Hübner** work for the German pro-Kremlin website *Russland.NEWS*.

Gunnar Norbert Lindemann and **Stefan Keuter** are members of the German far-right “Alternative for Germany” party that opposes the EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. **Keuter** illegally visited Crimea to take part in the Yalta International Economic Forum in 2018. **Lindemann** observed the illegitimate “general elections” in the DPR in November 2018.



German "observer" Gunnar Norbert Lindemann talking to South Ossetian "president" Anatoliy Bibilov.

Source: <http://cominf.org/node/1166523297c>

Slovak former Prime Minister **Ján Čarnogurský** is president of the Slovak-Russian Society, which called upon the Slovak authorities not to support the EU sanctions against Russia. **Čarnogurský** participated in several politically biased electoral observation missions, illegally travelled to Crimea to take part in the Yalta International Economic Forum in 2018, and is a regular commentator for the Russian state-controlled Sputnik website.

Given the involvement of the above-mentioned “observers” in various pro-Kremlin efforts, it is viable to suggest that Russian actors assisted the South Ossetian and Abkhaz “authorities” in identifying foreign individuals who would be ready to monitor the illegitimate “elections” in Russia-occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, it is also true that South Ossetian and Abkhaz separatist regimes were familiar with a number of the “foreign observers” and could have invited them to “observe” their “elections” without any help from Russian actors.

Assessments of the South Ossetian and Abkhaz 2019 “elections” by “foreign observers”

As the “elections” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia could be considered legitimate only by those countries that had previously recognised the sovereignty of these breakaway regions, the presence of “international observers” was a political statement in its own right. None of “foreign observers” went to South Ossetia or Abkhazia to actually monitor the “elections”; rather, they were there to mimic legitimate international election monitoring in order to create the impression that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were legitimate independent states. For example, South Ossetian “president” Anatoliy Bibilov said that the visit of “foreign observers” to South Ossetia attested to the “democratic nature of the elections”, while Russian MP Olga Kovitidi asserted that “extensive participation of Russian observers in the monitoring mission [...] demonstrated compliance not only with national laws, but also with international election legislation”.¹⁸

That the activities of “foreign observers” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia had nothing to do with the established principles and/or practices of international

18 “Priezd v Yuzhnyyu Osetiyu mezhdunarodnykh nablyudateley govorit o demokratichnosti vyborov, – Anatoliy Bibilov”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523262>.



Russian "observers" at the Abkhaz "presidential elections"

Source: <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190825/1028268123/Na-vysshem-urovne-mezhdunarodnye-nablyudateli-rasskazali-o-vyborakh-v-Abkhazii.html>

electoral observation was obvious not only from their political background but also from their public statements.

Even before the start of the “elections”, some “observers” made comments conveying a positive message about the process. For example, three days before voting day, Vladislav Berdichevskiy from the DPR said that they were “received well in Abkhazia” and that the Abkhazians were hospitable people who always supported Donbass in its willingness to be with Russia”.¹⁹

Most of the comments coming from “foreign observers”, however, were made to the public and media on voting day before the process was finished, which is against the code of conduct for international monitoring missions. In South Ossetia, Russian MP Yuriy Smirnov said that he was “sure that there would be no violations registered”,²⁰ while another Russian MP, Sergey Tsekov, even held that South Ossetian “parliamentarians who adopted the electoral legislation”

19 “Delegatsiya Narodnogo Soveta pribyla v Respubliku Abkhaziya dlya uchastiya v monitoringe provedeniya vyborov”, *Narodny sovet DNR*, 22 August (2019), <https://dnrsovet.su/delegatsiya-narodnogo-soveta-pribyla-v-respubliku-abkhaziya-dlya-uchastiya-v-monitoring-e-provedeniya-vyborov/>.

20 “Vybory v Yuzhnoy Osetii prokhodyat bez narusheniy, na vysokom urovne, – nablyudateli ot Gosdumy Rossii”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523243>.



Nicaraguan "observer" Melvin Agurcia with South Ossetian "foreign minister" Dmitriy Medoev

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/johan.backman.902/posts/10156534231283719>

completely ruled out any electoral fraud or ballot rigging,²¹ and that he had no doubts that the “elections” would be held fairly and objectively.²² Valeriy Skorokhodov from the DPR made a similar statement saying that South Ossetia “served as a model for the international community” because the system in place at polling stations did not make ballot rigging possible.²³

Many of the above-mentioned comments were apparently inspired by the statements of South Ossetian “officials” made during meetings with “foreign observers”. At Bibilov’s meeting with “observers” from Europe and Japan, South Ossetian “foreign minister” Dmitriy Medoev explained what was required from the “observers”: “It is important to show to the world that South Ossetia is a

21 “Mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli ne zafiksirovali narusheniy na izbiratel’nykh uchastkakh v Yuzhnoy Osetii”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523247>.

22 “V parlamente proshli vstrechi s mezhdunarodnymi nablyudatelyami”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523289>.

23 “Nablyudateli rasskazali Bibilovu o vpechatleniyakh ot vyborov v Yuzhnoy Osetii”, *Sputnik Ossetia*, 9 June (2019), https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/South_Ossetia/20190609/8769281/Nablyudateli-rasskazali-Bibilovu-o-vpechatleniyakh-ot-vyborov-v-Yuzhnoy-Osetii.html.

democratic state and that it is impossible to rig elections here. I think this is a high achievement of democratism, openness and transparency”.²⁴

“Foreign observers” clearly understood the line of Medoev’s argument. Mitsuhiro Kimura said that the aim of the “observers” was “exactly to make sure that everything was proceeding in a democratic manner and to inform the international community about this”.²⁵ Gunnar Norbert Lindemann noted that the “elections” were held democratically and said that “foreign observers” needed to address representatives of Western Europe to “recognise the legitimacy of the elections and independence of South Ossetia”.²⁶ Matteo Pressi admitted that his mission was to inform “Western states and, in particular, the parliament of Italy of the discrepancy between the situation in South Ossetia and publications in the Western media”.²⁷ And Kris Roman even suggested that the South Ossetian “elections” were more democratic than those in Europe.²⁸

Some “foreign observers” from Europe made geopolitical comments when talking about the “elections”. For instance, convicted defamer and stalker Johan Bäckman, falsely introduced as an assistant professor of the University of Helsinki, stated that the most important thing was that there was no war in South Ossetia, adding that the developments in Donetsk and Lugansk were a manifestation of the “military aggression of the West and Western militarised organisations”.²⁹

In Abkhazia, similar comments were issued by “foreign observers” to the public and media. The DPR’s politician Vladimir Vysotskiy said that he and other “observers” from the DPR had not seen any violations (“even the tiniest ones”) at the polling stations and that all the people he had met were friendly, content and joyful.³⁰ Marlo Montilla stressed that it was important for him to be present at the “presidential elections in a fraternal country”; he noted the “transparency of the process” and expressed his hope that voting would “proceed in the same democratic manner and that the outcomes would be positive”.³¹ Russian MP

24 “Nablyudatel’ iz Italii zayavil, chto voleiz’yavlenie osetin absolyutno transparentno”, *Res*, 10 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523297>.

25 “Vyborny v Yuzhnoy Osetii prokhodyat po evropeyskim standartam, – nablyudateli”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523256>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 “Nablyudatel’ iz Italii zayavil...”

28 “V Bel’gii protsess gosolovaniya otlichatsya ot yugoosetinskogo, – Kris Roman”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523268>.

29 “Yokhan Bekman: Dlya menya bol’shaya chest’ razvivat’ dvustoronnie otnosheniya”, *Res*, 9 June (2019), <http://cominf.org/node/1166523257>.

30 Asmat Tsvizhba, “Kak na prazdnik: mezhdunarodnye nablyudateli rasskazali o vyborakh v Abkhazii”, *Sputnik Abkhazia*, 25 August (2019), <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190825/1028268123/Na-vysshem-urovne-mezhdunarodnye-nablyudateli-rasskazali-o-vyborakh-v-Abkhazii.html>.

31 *Ibid.*



"Observers" from the DPR at the "elections" in Abkhazia.

Source: <https://anti-maidan.com/2019/08/26/delegatsiya-narodnogo-soveta-v-kachestve-nablyudatelej-prinyala-uchastie-v-vyborah-prezidenta-respubliki-abkhaziya/>



Gunnar Norbert Lindemann (centre), Stefan Keuter (second from right) and Patrick Poppel (right) at a press conference in Abkhazia.

Source: <https://dfwatch.net/european-far-right-politicians-praise-abkhazia-election-as-free-and-democratic-53768>

Olga Kovitidi did not notice any violations either and called the “monitoring of the elections” “a transparent way of supporting and developing democracy and human rights in Abkhazia”.³² The LPR’s Anna Soroka made a similar comment, saying that “the elections in Abkhazia ensured comprehensive protection of human rights and contributed to the development of all state mechanisms”.³³

Some “observers” made comments even less related to the evaluation of the conduct of the “elections”. For example, Ján Čarnogurský said he was impressed that one could find portraits of the soldiers killed during the Second World War at the polling stations: “After this experience, these elections are proceeding without any hate or populist statements. This attests to the democratic nature of the political society of Abkhazia”.³⁴ Ludmila Hübner noted that people who went to vote “were dressed up, came with children, and there were both older and younger people. [...] This tells us that people love their motherland, fight for its future and want to live peacefully and be happy”.³⁵

Patrick Poppel, Stefan Keuter and Gunnar Norbert Lindemann gave a press-conference reporting on their “observation” while the voting process was still ongoing. Keuter said that they had not seen any “significant mistakes or violations” at the polling stations they had visited, while Lindemann declared that the “elections were held according to the European standards”.³⁶

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 “Nablyudateli iz Germanii i Avstrii nazvali vybory v Abkhazii demokraticeskimi”, *RIA Novosti*, 25 August (2019), <https://ria.ru/20190825/1557887219.html>.

Conclusion

Neither “Republic of South Ossetia” nor “Republic of Abkhazia” is recognised as an independent sovereign state by the overwhelming majority of the UN Member States, which consider South Ossetia and Abkhazia as regions of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders. The only UN Member States that recognise independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia are: Russia (which supports their *de facto* independence by military, economic and political means), Nauru, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela. Other entities that recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states are territories occupied by Russian forces (Transnistria, Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic), as well as Nagorno-Karabakh.

As any “elections” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia would not be considered legitimate by the international community, no established election monitoring organisation would send its mission to observe “elections” in these two regions. The EU’s position on the “elections” in South Ossetia and Georgia is that they went “against the continuing efforts to peaceful resolution of the conflict in Georgia”.³⁷

In an attempt to give international legitimacy to the “elections”, the “authorities” of South Ossetia and Abkhazia organised their own “international monitoring”. The people they invited to observe the “elections” can be divided into three groups: (1) official representatives of the countries that recognise their sovereignty and independence, (2) representatives of the pseudo-states largely controlled by Russia, and (3) foreign individuals known for their previous involvement in various pro-Kremlin efforts and coming mostly from far-right parties, organisations and movements.

37 “EU Statement on the Situation in Georgia Delivered at the OSCE Permanent Council Meeting in Vienna, 5 September 2019”.

These pro-Kremlin efforts include but are not limited to: (1) previous participation in politically biased and/or illegitimate electoral monitoring missions in Russia and elsewhere; (2) legitimisation and justification of Russia's actions aimed at undermining the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine; (3) cooperation with the pro-Kremlin propaganda resources; (4) criticism of the European sanctions imposed on Russia in relation to its aggression towards Ukraine; and (5) membership in Western pro-Kremlin organisations, movements and groups.

The presence of "foreign observers" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was underpinned not by the actual need to observe the "elections", but rather by the intent to mimic legitimate international election monitoring in order to create an impression that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were legitimate independent states. Hence, the activities of "foreign observers" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia had nothing to do with the established principles and/or practices of international electoral observation.



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