

Election Observers and Key Constituencies in Russia's 2011-2012 Election Cycle

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 214
September 2012

Graeme Robertson
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Election-monitoring reports from both international and domestic election observers often play a key role in post-election politics. The extent to which election observers are trusted or influential thus is of critical importance. However, while there is now a growing body of research on the quality of election observation, less is known about how crucial constituencies within the countries being monitored feel about and react to the verdicts handed down by election monitors.

In this policy memo, I look at attitudes toward election observers using data from an original survey of educated, urban, Internet-using Russian citizens taken two weeks before the presidential elections of March 2012. The data demonstrate a considerable degree of support for the right of observers to participate in elections, but some uncertainty over how much to trust their post-election reports. Moreover, despite support for both domestic and foreign election monitors, there is considerable opposition to allowing foreigners to fund Russian election monitoring organizations.

Survey Description

To assess attitudes to election observers, we conducted an Internet survey focusing on a key political demographic in Russia—educated, upper-income, Internet-using urbanites.¹ We refer to this group as Socially and Politically Active Russian Citizens

¹ The survey was conducted two weeks before the March presidential election. Respondents were solicited from internet panels of more than 350,000 participants by a leading market research company. Respondents were chosen at random among 16 to 65 year olds from cities with a population of more than 1 million. Only respondents with at least some higher education and who reported having enough money to buy at least some consumer durables completed the full survey.

(SPARCs). We defined SPARCs as prosperous people who possess a higher education, live in major cities (with a population of more than 1 million), and are frequent Internet users. About 1,200 respondents participated in 20-25 minute-long surveys probing their attitudes and responses to election observation and other topical political issues.

We decided to focus on this demographic, rather than the population at large, for three main reasons. First, in the Russian context in particular (though this is very likely to hold in other contexts too), middle class urbanites have played a key role in recent politics and, in particular, the protests that took place after the parliamentary elections of December 2011. This is especially true of Internet users—the so-called “hamsters” — whose political activism has been the subject of considerable discussion in recent months. Second, while broad national surveys indicate little knowledge of election monitoring organizations, SPARCs demonstrate considerably higher levels of knowledge of election monitoring groups. This is important because the additional knowledge of this group meant we could expect more meaningful answers to more detailed questions. Third, while the opinions of this group are not representative of the population as a whole, there is evidence in public opinion research that broader populations can be prompted by the views of opinion leaders like those who fit the SPARCs demographic profile.

The survey was administered online between the parliamentary elections and the presidential elections, ending two weeks before the latter. Respondents were randomly assigned one of four texts to read before being asked a series of questions about their attitudes toward election observers. The texts were lightly modified versions of reports that had appeared in Russian newspapers around the period of the election. The first text was neutral, stating that parliamentary elections had been held, noting the number of candidates, parties, and voters, and the fact that all parties in the outgoing parliament were represented in the new one. Respondents in this group are referred to as “Neutral” in the results tables. The second text contained the neutral text, but it also mentioned the leading domestic election observation group in Russia, *Golos*, detailing some of the criticisms *Golos* had leveled at the elections, and noting that *Golos* is a Russian organization that has been working on elections since 2000. This text is referred to in the tables as the “*Golos*” treatment. The third text was identical to the second, but instead the criticisms were presented as coming from the OSCE. Additionally, some descriptive information on OSCE monitoring was provided. This is the “OSCE” treatment. Finally, in a fourth text, the descriptive information on *Golos* was replaced with a modified text from a Russian tabloid story that had appeared on the eve of the elections. This story described *Golos* as having close ties to the U.S. State Department and receiving not just moral support, but also detailed instructions and money. This is the “GosDep” treatment.

The range of treatments allows us to examine several different aspects at once. By comparing “Neutral,” “*Golos*,” and “OSCE,” we can identify whether knowing that observers were from a Russian organization has any effect on the evaluations respondents give to questions about election observers and whether this impact is similar to, or different from, the associations of the OSCE brand. In addition, the

“GosDep” treatment allows to us to consider whether reminding respondents of the claim that *Golos* receives funding from U.S. government sources has any effect on attitudes.

Results

The first thing to note about attitudes to election observation among the SPARCs group is that there are important differences between respondents’ views of whether monitoring organizations should have the right to monitor elections and their views on the trustworthiness or reliability of election observer reports. While SPARCs overwhelmingly support the right of observers to participate in the electoral process, they are considerably less certain of the claims observers make in the post-election period.

More than 80 percent of respondents supported either free or only lightly regulated access of observers to polling stations (**Table 1**). Interestingly, support for free access was highest among respondents who were specifically prompted to think either of the Russian organization, *Golos*, or of the OSCE. This suggests that both these organizations enjoy a respected “brand name” among educated, upper-income urbanites in Russia. Moreover, even among those who were prompted to think that *Golos* receives instructions and money from Washington, there was almost no support for forbidding election observers.

Furthermore, respondents not only believed that observers should have access to polling stations, a majority believed that the presence of observers contributes to making elections more free and fair (**Table 2**). Some 60 percent of respondents agreed with this position (which is actually quite controversial in the literature on election observation), while only 12 percent disagreed. Again, differences among treatments were small, although belief in the “observer effect” was slightly stronger among those prompted to think about *Golos* or the OSCE – even with the reminder of *Golos*’ foreign supporters.

Nonetheless, despite high levels of support for observer access to polling stations, even educated, upper-income, Internet-using urbanites in Russia are uncertain about how to interpret the observers’ announcements concerning the quality of elections. As **Table 3** shows, only about half of respondents said they trusted election observer reports either completely or somewhat. Again, “complete trust” was somewhat higher for those receiving the *Golos* prompt, though differences were small. On the other hand, only 11 percent expressed outright suspicion. More than 4 in 10 respondents remain to be convinced either way. Consequently, while we can conclude that there is broad support for the rights of observers to participate in Russian elections with minimal interference from the Russian authorities, there is still significant uncertainty, and hence, room for political contestation, over how to interpret observer reports.

Finally, given the ongoing controversy over foreign funding for Russian non-governmental organizations, and the hostility of the Russian government toward *Golos* in particular, we asked respondents how they felt about foreign financing of election observers (**Table 4**). We found that, despite high levels of support for election monitors, foreign participation in financing Russian domestic observation teams was greeted, even

by SPARCs, with a much higher degree of skepticism. Some 44 percent of respondents thought that foreign financing of domestic election monitoring organizations should be banned completely, and a further 26 percent thought it ought to be tightly regulated. Only 22 percent of respondents felt that such assistance should be able to be given freely or should only be subject to light regulation. Again, differences across treatments were minimal, although recipients of the *Golos* prompts were marginally more categorical in opposing foreign funding – a possible result of the Russian government’s consistent campaign against *Golos*.

Conclusion

Despite a widely cited post-Soviet suspicion of foreigners in general (Western intentions in particular), key Russian elites exhibit strong support for the activities of election observers, both domestic and foreign. There is also a belief that election observation in and of itself can contribute to making elections more free and fair. These supportive attitudes among what a key architect of the Putin-era political system, Vladislav Surkov, famously called the “angry urbanites” are particularly interesting in light of the Russian government’s sustained efforts to discredit election observers. If anything, mentioning the name *Golos*, or international OSCE observers, serves to strengthen, not weaken, attitudes toward observers’ right to participate in Russian elections and in their effect on the quality of the elections themselves.

It is striking in this context that attitudes remain very robust across each of the different prompts that recipients received. This suggests that attitudes are fairly well entrenched and that people are resistant to the (relatively subtle) written prompts we administered.

Nonetheless, the survey suggests that even among highly educated urbanites, there is still room for shaping attitudes toward observer reports. While support for access is high, a large section of the SPARCs population is unsure about whether or not to trust election observer reports. Interestingly, if only coincidentally, this uncertainty is consonant with a growing skepticism about the quality of election observer reports in the academic community.

Finally, our survey also suggests that at least as far as election observation is concerned, the Russian government is operating in a permissive context in cracking down on foreign funding. Even many educated, upper-income, Internet-using urbanites are skeptical of foreign funding and support legislation that makes it more difficult for Russian NGOs to receive it.

Table 1: What kind of access should observers have to polling stations?
(percent of respondents)

Treatment	Free Access	Lightly Regulated	Strictly Regulated	Forbidden	Don't Know/Won't Answer
Neutral	56	28	7	4	6
Golos	64	23	6	1	7
OSCE	64	23	5	1	7
GosDep	52	31	8	3	7

Table 2: To what extent do you agree that elections are more free and fair when observers are present? (percent of respondents)

Treatment	Strongly	Somewhat	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree	Don't Know/Won't Answer
Neutral	20	40	23	8	4	5
Golos	25	38	24	7	2	4
OSCE	24	36	29	4	2	4
GosDep	23	39	23	7	4	4

Table 3: How much do you trust election-monitoring organizations? (percent of respondents)

Treatment	Completely Trust	Somewhat Trust	Neither Trust nor Don't Trust	Somewhat Distrust	Completely Distrust	Don't Know/Won't Answer
Neutral	11	40	35	7	4	4
Golos	15	42	32	7	2	3
OSCE	14	35	38	6	3	4
GosDep	11	38	34	9	4	4

Table 4: Under what conditions should foreign governments be able to give money to domestic election-monitoring organizations? (percent of respondents)

Treatment	Freely	Lightly Regulated	Strictly Regulated	Forbidden	Don't Know/Won't Answer
Neutral	9	13	26	44	9
Golos	10	12	23	47	9
OSCE	9	11	26	44	12
GosDep	9	10	29	45	7

Elliott School of International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

PONARS ● NEW APPROACHES
● TO RESEARCH AND
E U R A S I A ● SECURITY IN EURASIA

© PONARS Eurasia 2012. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of academics that advances new policy approaches to research and security in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. The publication was made possible by grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. www.ponarseurasia.org