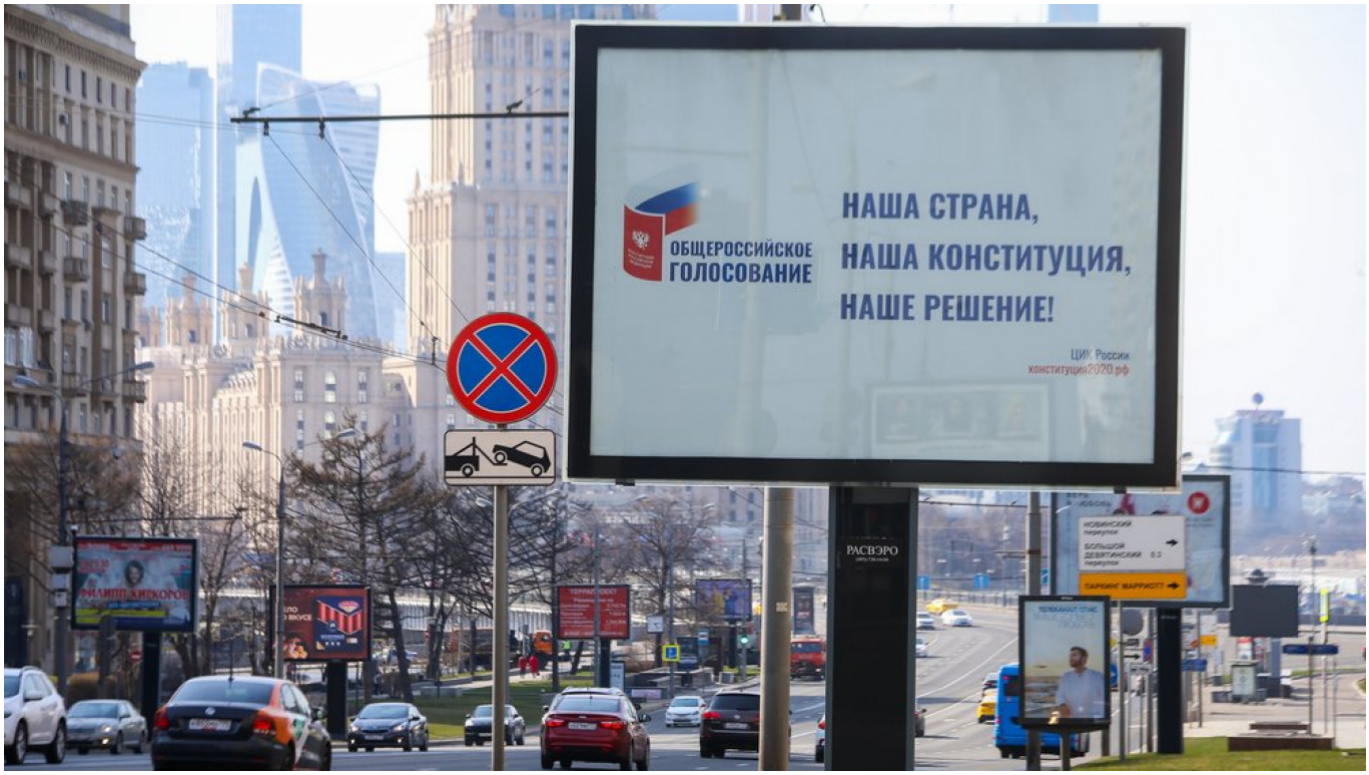
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Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod to Allow E-Voting for Putin's Constitutional Amendments

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A campaign poster calling for the public to vote on the constitutional amendments. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Moscow and central Russia's Nizhny Novgorod region will be able to cast their votes online on a set of constitutional amendments that would allow President Vladimir Putin to extend his rule into the next decade, election officials said Thursday.

The vote was originally set for April 22 but was pushed back to July 1 due to the coronavirus. The proposed changes to Russia's Constitution would allow Putin — who has been in office either as president or prime minister since 1999 — to serve two more six-year terms without taking a break.

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The Central Election Commission (CEC) said it has approved e-voting bids from Moscow and the Nizhny Novgorod region, rejecting bids from three other regions including St. Petersburg.

The e-voting system will be based on the technology used during the 2019 municipal elections in the Russian capital, Communications Minister Maksut Shadayev said according to the Kommersant business daily. A French cryptographer said he was able to hack into the e-voting system ahead of last year's vote, exposing a security breach in its protocol in 20 minutes.

“It’s hard to believe that Moscow will conduct e-voting in a way that all voters could trust its results,” Vasily Vaisenberg, an expert at the Golos vote-monitoring NGO, told Kommersant.

The technology allows a maximum of 10 million voters to be casting ballots online at a time, according to CEC deputy chief Nikolai Bulayev. Shadayev maintained that the system will be “stable and reliable.”

Moscow plans to test the e-voting system sometime after next Friday.

Putin approved election law changes last month that allow Russians to vote online, prompting questions over whether the new rules will apply to the upcoming vote on the Constitution.

Observers have said that he expanded voting options, including e-voting and allowing early voting the day after Russia’s rescheduled Victory Day parade, to ensure high turnout. Polls have shown a majority or close to a majority of Russians expressing willingness to vote in favor of the amendments, which in addition to resetting presidential term counts enshrine social guarantees.

Putin has seen his popularity fall to historic lows since he first introduced the package of amendments amid a sweeping government shake-up in January, with public discontent brewing over his handling of the economic fallout from the coronavirus.

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