The Moscow Times
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First Results Show Overwhelming Support for Russia's Constitutional Reforms

July 01, 2020



The Kremlin has pulled out all the stops to encourage turnout in the nationwide vote. **Vladimir Smirnov / TASS**

Nearly three-quarters of Russian voters have backed constitutional changes that pave the way for extending President Vladimir Putin's rule until 2036, according to the Russian election commission's preliminary results released Wednesday afternoon.

Polling stations have closed in the Russian Far East as the rest of the country continues voting for or against the package of 206 constitutional amendments. In addition to enshrining populist and conservative measures in the Constitution, the changes cancel a sitting or former president's term limits, allowing Putin to seek two more terms when his current term ends in 2024.

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After processing 1% of the ballots, the Central Election Commission (CEC) said 74.54% voted "yes" and 24.3% voted "no" to the package of amendments.

Observers criticized the CEC for releasing early results before polling stations close in the rest of the country.

Opponents of the vote who conducted their own exit polls said support for the reforms stood at 51% in Moscow (versus 49% against) and 44% in St. Petersburg (versus 56% against).

Nationwide voter turnout stands at over 60% so far, the CEC said.

Observers have previously said that the Kremlin was seeking a high turnout and "yes" votes to give legitimacy to the amendments, which have already been approved by both chambers of parliament, the Constitutional Court and Putin himself.

The Kremlin pulled out all the stops to encourage turnout, with polls extended over nearly a week, the last day of voting declared a national holiday and prizes — including apartments and cars — on offer to voters.

Putin has said the changes would not come into effect unless supported by a majority.

Golos, an independent election monitor, says it has received hundreds of complaints of violations, including people voting more than once and claims employers are putting pressure on staff to cast ballots.

AFP contributed reporting to this article.

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