

Over 78 percent of Russians back constitutional amendments, 21 opposed – preliminary results

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After processing 95 percent of the ballots, the Russian election commission has announced that 78 percent of the voters approved the changes to the constitution, while 21,1 percent opposed. Nationwide turnout was at 65 percent.

Millions of Russians went to the polls on Wednesday to cast their vote for or against the 206 proposed amendments, already approved by the legislature. This was preceded by five days of early voting starting June 25 and even online voting in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod – all due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which delayed the vote from its originally scheduled date of April 22.

Exit polls published after the voting ended showed 71 percent support for the amendments and 28 percent opposition. They were based on over 445,000 voters at 800 polling stations, with a 70 percent response rate.

Widely reported in the West as giving President Vladimir Putin a chance at two more terms, the amendments are actually a sweeping set of changes to Russia's basic law. The 1993 constitution was imposed by President Boris Yeltsin literally at gunpoint, after he sent tanks to bomb the parliament.

While the presidential amendment could in theory allow Putin to run for office once his current term expires in 2024, it also includes a two-term limit and denies eligibility to persons who previously held foreign citizenship and lived in Russia for less than 25 years. Residents of Crimea, which rejoined Russia in 2014 after seceding from Ukraine, are exempt from that residency requirement. Another amendment removes eligibility for most major government positions from those who hold foreign citizenships or residency permits.

Several amendments are dedicated to social issues, including a state guarantee of a minimum wage above subsistence level, indexing of pensions for inflation, defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman, and a mention of God in regards to Russian heritage. Another amendment says the Russian constitution

takes primacy in cases where international treaties may be interpreted to go against it.

There were 839 reports of violations during the week of voting, including 126 on Wednesday, according to deputy interior minister Aleksandr Gorovoy, but they weren't serious and didn't affect the outcome of the vote. Several hundred people have gathered in central Moscow to protest against the constitutional amendments.

The demonstrators were peaceful, while police officers were filmed handing out face masks to protesters and urging them to take care of their health. A similar event in St. Petersburg was attended by only several dozen people, who were hiding under their umbrellas due to bad weather. The demonstrators ignored calls to disperse from the officers, but left after several street sweeper vehicles were sent to the square.
