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[The Russian presidential elections outside Russia](#)



During the 2018 presidential elections in the Russian Federation [394](#) polling stations ([401 according to other data](#)) were opened in 145 countries around the world on the election day alone. In addition, pre-voting polling stations were opened in many countries (in further 399 settlements), and the so-called ‘field voting’ was also held. The latter happens when an embassy [decides](#) to hold voting outside the polling station at the request of Russian citizens. At the same time, merely 53.5 thousand voters took advantage of early voting opportunities, giving a figure of only 134 voters per polling station. However, some records were broken as well: for example, in one of four polling stations in Tallinn, four thousand voters cast their votes in the course of early voting. Nevertheless, in relative terms early voting abroad constituted a significant share of the turnout, i.e. 11.3% of all those who voted before the election day. On the other hand, early voting within the Russian Federation fell to a minimum level this year: 0.3% of all those who cast their vote.

The majority of polling stations were located in the embassies and consulates of the Russian Federation, Russian centres and other organisations affiliated with the Russian Federation. Some unusual polling stations included an unfinished nuclear power plant in Belarus and military units in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Belarus. Early voting was often held in hotels (as was the case in Baden-Baden, Würzburg, Stuttgart, Samui Island and Tenerife). However, in some countries Russia did not manage to agree on holding the elections outside its diplomatic facilities. For instance, Estonia and Lithuania banned the Russian Federation from

organising field voting or opening polling stations outside diplomatic missions. This provoked a scandal where the official representative of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made appeals to 'human rights structures of the EU and the OSCE'. Further on, the Russian Embassy in Estonia [changed](#) its attitude to the situation, announcing that all polling stations in Tallinn were located in the historical centre of the city to address 'voters' preferences', not because polling stations outside diplomatic missions were not permitted.

In addition to early voting and field voting, Russian diplomatic missions also organised in-home voting at the request of Russian citizens, [yet](#) 'the number of such trips and their geographical coverage is limited due to the number of portable ballot boxes, as well as the requirement for the staff to return to the polling station by 8:00 pm.'

What about the turnout?

Although a number of media titles reported '[record turnout](#)' abroad, the turnout in out-of-Russia polling stations is not so easy to calculate, mostly because of the specific characteristics of the organisation of elections in other countries.

According to the current legislation, any citizen of the Russian Federation can vote abroad, regardless of whether they reside there permanently or have come to make a one-day tourist trip. This year, in order to vote in Russia outside one's place of residence, citizens were no longer required to take an absentee voting. Nevertheless, they were required to notify the territorial electoral commission (for instance, via electronic filing through the state services portal) no later than six days before the vote. While being abroad, a citizen of the Russian Federation can vote in any of the polling stations that have been open, without any prior notification of the electoral commission.

This legislative norm entails political and economic difficulties. First, such a rule creates a vulnerability: in theory, a Russian citizen can vote even at all the 394 polling stations, and since voter lists are kept on paper, this fact will not be revealed at least until the end of the voting day. According to the current legislation, if such a case is detected, the citizen concerned will be held criminally liable and the elections at those polling stations will have to be held again.

Secondly, this rule imposes additional labor-intensive and, in most cases, hardly achievable obligations on PEC employees abroad: it is necessary to remember all voters who came to the polling station that day in order to prevent repeat vote and, as a result, the disruption of elections on this station. This year at a polling station in Berlin, a Russian citizen tried to vote twice. Surprisingly, he was recognized by the commission's staff on time and not added to the voter lists again. If for a second vote this citizen of the Russian Federation chose a site outside Berlin - there would be no possibility to stop the offense, and the results of the elections in both stations would have to be considered invalid. Thirdly, this legislative provision has economic consequences: in the absence of information on the number of potential voters, polling stations must be provided with a greater number of staff and ballot cards. In the case of the March elections, the number of ballot papers received by election commissions abroad was almost three times as high as the number of voters on the lists. This is a rather unusual situation when it comes to the organisation of elections since electoral commissions within the Russian Federation usually receive fewer ballot papers than their respective recorded numbers of voters. In addition, a large number of reserve ballots is a potential threat of ballot-stuffing, taking into account that there are no observers on many foreign sites, and voter lists are drawn up after the fact.

What could this imply? It may mean that diplomatic missions of the Russian Federation in other countries can hardly predict how many Russian citizens are currently outside the Russian Federation and will come to polling stations on the voting day. However, even if they wanted to, they could obtain such information only if citizens voluntarily decided to report to the consulate or wrote a statement asking to be included in the voter list. According to the Central Electoral Commission, there were no such statements at most polling stations outside Russia.

However, the consequences of this legislation are not only negative. One positive outcome is the opportunity to report an exceptionally high turnout: the lower the number of voters in the lists before the elections, the higher the turnout at the end of voting. This idea, however, was not invented this year: in the 2012 presidential elections, the official voter turnout abroad was only slightly lower: 96.2%.

Moreover, it is not entirely clear how voter lists are compiled. Statistical analysis of the results from 394 polling stations abroad showed that only 47 polling stations had a turnout under 100%. At the remaining 347 polling stations, the number of voters entered on the lists coincided with the number of those who came to the polling stations, which either means that Russian citizens living abroad are incredibly dutiful, or that all the voter lists were written *ex post* and, in fact, are not lists of eligible voters but, instead, the lists of actual voters. In other words, they cannot be used to calculate the turnout.

In order to understand what is really happening with the electoral turnout we need to look beyond the lists of eligible voters. One of the methods would be to look at the statistics of Russian citizens kept by migration services and ministries of internal affairs in other countries because they are interested in keeping track of this figure as accurately as possible. Moreover, migration services have such information since it is not provided on a voluntary basis but, instead, it is collected for each foreigner who has entered the country. For example, the Estonian authorities [tell us](#) that there are about 83 thousand Russians in their country who are eligible to vote. In contrast, the lists kept by the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation have a much smaller number of voters in Estonia. If we count the turnout on the basis of data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Estonia, only 34% of eligible voters actually took part in the presidential elections in Estonia.

Additionally, if we compare voter lists in other countries in the 2018 and 2012 elections, we will see that the number of voters increased by only 24.3 thousand in the course of six years whereas, according to the Committee for Citizen Initiatives [report](#), 'each year, 120,000-150,000 people have left the country each year since 2013.'

Thus, the government spends enormous amounts of money on organising the voting abroad, opening polling stations in the most exotic places on the planet and yet a very high number of Russians remain unaccounted for in this process.

How do Russians vote abroad?

Quite surprisingly, the polling station outside Russia which had the lowest share of votes cast to Vladimir Putin in these elections was neither London nor Amsterdam. Instead, it was the polling station in Russia's Consulate General in Iran where 68% of voters voted for Grudinin, while only 29% voted for the incumbent president. This situation is interesting also because merely 110 voters were registered at that polling station (No. 8109), which implies that the majority of them are consulate employees.

Overall, small diplomatic missions in these elections demonstrated quite subversive results. For instance, the polling station at the Russian Embassy in Brunei only 58% out of 26 people who voted cast their vote for V. Putin. Similar results were obtained at embassies in Gabon and Djibouti: 62% and 65.5% respectively.

The highest figures of support for Putin were observed at the polling stations located in military units, reaching even 99%.

Further down the line are the polling stations in Latvia and Moldova: in these countries, Vladimir Putin gained the support of 97.5% of voters, with 3,500 to 4,500 absolute votes, since polling stations in these countries are fairly large. Estonia recorded above 90% at all the nine polling stations, with increased support towards the east of the country.

Elections at out-of-Russia polling stations might be more representative than elections within the Russian Federation. For instance, Ksenia Sobchak received the best result (as a percentage) at polling stations in Amsterdam (27%), London (23.4%) and Rehovot (Israel) (23.3%) whereas P. Grudinin received over 20% of the votes in Guyana (20%), Djibouti (20.7%), Iran (68.2%), Japan (23.5% and 21%) and Andorra (21.8%). The best result for V. Zhirinovskiy was recorded at the polling station located at a nuclear power plant under construction in Belarus (14.9%), in Botswana (12.8%) and at military units in Armenia (12.9% and 10.6%). S. Baburin received his best result (7.7%) also in Botswana.

To sum up, the organisation of elections abroad during the 2018 presidential elections had a grand scale: polling stations were set up in some of the most exotic places on the planet, early voting was [organised](#) at 399 locations, with buses bringing voters to the stations. Did these efforts help to achieve a significant increase in

the turnout? They did not. The number of those who voted abroad increased by merely 32 thousand in comparison with 2012, considering that a portion of that figure can be explained by the natural increase resulting from migration. How much budget money was spent on the process? We will find out once the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation has published its reports on the federal expenditures on the preparation and actual conduct of elections (the website was not available when this article was written). Are there any geographical patterns of support? In order to answer this question, a more detailed analysis is needed but some trends are already evident. What prompted Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to open an early voting station in the Maldives for a period of four days without opening a single early voting station in England and Scotland? For now, this remains a mystery.

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