

Constitutional and political change in Russia

In January 2020, Vladimir Putin proposed sweeping constitutional amendments. These have been widely seen as preparing the way for him to retain political influence after the end of his fourth and probably final presidency in 2024. Putin's announcement was followed by the resignation of the government. Dmitry Medvedev, who has been Prime Minister since 2012, has made way for Mikhail Mishustin. While these changes open up new possibilities for Putin's post-2024 future, his actual intentions are still unclear.

Putin's proposed constitutional changes

Russia's current [constitution](#) dates from December 1993, when it was adopted by referendum. Apart from a few minor adjustments concerning the names and number of Russia's constituent regions, the only major change to date was in [2008](#), when the terms of office of the State Duma (lower house of parliament) and president, previously four years each, were extended to five years and six years respectively.

On 15 January 2020, Putin announced plans to overhaul the constitution in his annual state of the nation [address](#) to the Federal Assembly (the two houses of parliament combined). On 23 January, legislative [amendments](#) to that effect were debated and [unanimously](#) approved at a preliminary first reading by the State Duma; however, a further two readings of the amendments are still mandatory.

Current situation	Proposed amendment
The president appoints the prime minister with the consent of the State Duma.	The State Duma would have the power to approve the prime minister and government ministers. The president would not be able to reject the prime minister and government ministers approved by the State Duma, although he would be able to dismiss them.
Not mentioned	The president would consult with the Federation Council (upper house of parliament) on his choices for defence minister and other security posts.
Not mentioned	The State Council would define the broad lines of domestic and foreign policy.
Presidents are limited to a maximum of two consecutive terms.	Presidents would be limited to a maximum total of two terms in office.
The president must be a Russian citizen and have lived in Russia for at least 10 years.	The president would have to be a Russian citizen, have lived in Russia for at least 25 years, and never have held citizenship or the right to permanent residence in another country.
Not mentioned	The constitution would take precedence over international agreements and decisions of international bodies.
Not mentioned	Minimum wages would be guaranteed not to be below the subsistence level; guaranteed indexation of pensions and social benefits.

Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds/three-quarters majority of the lower/upper houses of parliament respectively. Although there is no constitutional requirement to do so, Putin also suggests putting his proposals to a 'national vote' (not a 'referendum', presumably because the precedent of the 1993 referendum would [imply](#) a minimum 50 % voter turnout for a valid result), planned for [April 2020](#).

What is behind the constitutional amendments?

In his state of the nation address, Putin claims that the amendments will adapt the Constitution to changing circumstances, protect Russian sovereignty, strengthen the rule of law, give regional governors more say in decision-making, and confer more responsibility on parliament. On paper at least, they introduce more checks and balances, redistributing some presidential powers to the parliament and other institutions.

Inevitably, the changes have revived speculation about Putin's plans for after 2024, when his fourth and probably final presidential term is due to expire. With Putin loyalists holding a three-quarters majority in

the State Duma, it would have been easy enough to lift the constitutional restriction barring a fifth term. However, Putin has repeatedly [denied](#) wanting to stay on as president, and [warned](#) against any return to Soviet-style leadership for life. Indeed, the proposed amendments would further restrict terms of office and slightly weaken presidential powers.

Nevertheless, the constitutional amendments still give Putin several [options](#) to exert political power, formal or informal, even without the presidency. The most straightforward path would be to simply revert to the '[tandemocracy](#)' of 2008-2012, during which Putin served as prime minister under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. Arguably, the proposed weakening of presidential powers might make such an arrangement more palatable for Putin. Alternatively, he could install himself as speaker of the State Duma, benefiting from the Parliament's enhanced powers to approve the government. The proposed amendments on the State Council open up a third option for Putin to stay in power: although there are no details on how the Council would function or whether its decisions would be binding on the president, in theory at least it could enjoy considerable [influence](#).

Some [observers](#) have mentioned [Kazakhstan](#) as a potential model for Putin to follow. Following a similar process of constitutional reform, long-time president Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down in March 2019. However, as "chair of the country's Security Council, he is scarcely less powerful than before. Responding to speculation that the State Council could serve as a platform for a similar role in Russia, Putin [denies](#) wanting to create such a position, as this would be 'unacceptable' and erode the president's powers.

A leadership reshuffle

A few hours after the state of the nation address, Dmitry Medvedev – who has been prime minister since 2012 – [stepped down](#) with the rest of the government, arguing that this was necessary in order to give Putin a free hand to amend the constitution. Blamed by many Russians for the country's weak economy and suspected of corruption, Medvedev had an approval rating of just [38 %](#) in December 2019 and had become something of a [political liability](#). In his new role as deputy chair of the Security Council – a body chaired by Putin comprising heads of security and defence agencies that advises the president on security issues – he retains some [influence](#), and also stays on as leader of the pro-Putin United Russia party.

Russia's new prime minister is the hitherto relatively unknown Mikhail Mishustin. In his former capacity as head of the Russian federal tax office, Mishustin drew [praise](#) for successfully digitising tax collection, helping to raise government revenue and eliminate corruption. As an efficient technocrat, Mishustin could be similarly successful in getting Russia's [faltering](#) National Projects back on track; with a combined investment of US\$400 billion over the next five years, these aim to revive economic performance, improve infrastructure and reverse demographic decline. At the same time, his lack of political connections may make him [less likely](#) to compete with Putin or a designated successor.

No clarity as to what will happen in 2024

While creating several options for Putin, the recent constitutional and political changes reveal little about his future intentions. It is still unclear whether Putin plans to remain in charge after 2024, and if so, in what capacity. There are no clues as to his preferred successor to the presidency. Dmitry Medvedev and defence minister Sergey Shoigu are among the many names that have been mentioned, but it is equally possible that Putin, like Boris Yeltsin before him, will opt for someone [less well known](#).

Reactions from Russia

Although Putin had previously [hinted](#) at constitutional change, his announcement has taken even political insiders by [surprise](#). Many Russians seem to take his arguments at face value: according to a [survey](#) conducted shortly afterwards by state-owned pollsters VCIOM, 45 % believe that he is genuinely interested in shaking up the system, compared to 11 % who feel that he wants to keep things the way they are. In any case, a majority ([54 %](#), as of July 2019) would be happy to see Putin stay on as president after 2024.

The liberal opposition is struggling to mobilise public opinion against Putin's plans to 'rule for ever'. Moscow local councillor Ilya Yashin has [called](#) for mass protests, but most demonstrators at a 19 January 2020 rally seemed more interested in other [issues](#), such as violence against opposition activists and journalists. Fellow activist Alexey Navalny is [sceptical](#) of the value of such initiatives, given that Russia's constitution is in any case 'abominable' and 'not worth defending'.

