

As oil prices plunge and coronavirus spreads, Russian oligarchy seeks to keep Putin in power indefinitely

By Clara Weiss
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On Tuesday, the Russian Duma (parliament) ratified proposed changes to the constitution and voted to annul the presidential terms of Vladimir Putin, which would make it possible for him to run for president again in 2024. The Federal Council approved of these changes on Wednesday. A national referendum on these changes is scheduled for April 22.

The constitutional changes were first proposed by Putin in his state of the nation address on January 15. Hours later, the entire Russian government resigned and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was replaced by Mikhail Mishustin.

The constitutional amendments are of a thoroughly reactionary character. Beyond formally expanding the powers of the parliament and the Constitutional Court—steps whose actual implications remain unclear—the amendments undermine the separation of church and state, and promote ethnic chauvinism and nationalism. A reference to God will be added to the Constitution, the role of Russian as the language of a state-forming ethnic group will be enshrined, and officials are barred from holding foreign passports and residence permits.

Article 67.1 of the Constitution will now state: “The Russian Federation, united by a many thousand-year-long history, is preserving the memory of its ancestors, the ideals and the faith in God transmitted to us, as well as the continuity of the development of the Russian state; it recognizes the unity of the state as historically formed.” Another amendment will lead to an article emphasizing that education of children in patriotism is a priority task for the state. Moreover, the “defense of the family” and the “defense of the institution of marriage as a union between man and woman” will be enshrined in the Constitution.

The speaker of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin called the changes “necessary given today’s challenges and society’s demands.”

In addition to approving these changes to the Constitution, the Duma also voted to annul the four presidential terms that Vladimir Putin has served since 2000. Despite a formal two-term limitation on future presidents, the motion states that someone who has served or is serving as president can “participate as a candidate in the [next] presidential election.”

The motion was introduced by Valentina Tereshkova, the former cosmonaut and an MP for the ruling United Russia party, who pointed to “unpredictable risks” to the country which necessitated “reliable insurance.” The Duma passed her proposal with 382 votes, with 42 MPs abstaining but no one against. A proposal by the leader of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, to dissolve parliament and call snap elections for September 2020, was voted down.

In a speech before parliament, Putin endorsed the motion. Underlying the sense of panic and doom in the Russian ruling class behind these moves, he emphasized that a strong presidency was “absolutely necessary” for Russia to maintain “stability” and prevent a “division of society.” He stated, “Incidentally, there are precedents for elections for more than two terms, including in the United States. And why? Look: the Great Depression, huge economic problems, unemployment and poverty in the US at that time, and later on, World War II. When a country is going through such upheavals and such difficulties (in our case we have not yet overcome all the problems since the USSR, this is also clear), stability may be more important and must be given priority. All the more so, let me repeat, when a country still has many problems.”

Valentina Matviyenko, a long-time ally of Putin and former mayor of St. Petersburg, stated on national television: “This proposal will calm everyone down. All this discussion of who would be the successor, what would happen to national security, these are all alarming processes.”

The moves toward strengthening authoritarian rule in Russia come amid a staggering escalation of the social and political crisis of the capitalist system, which is now being massively exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Internationally, Russia is engulfed in an escalating conflict with US imperialism and NATO. In recent weeks, escalating military clashes in Syria have brought Russia and Turkey, a NATO-member, to the brink of open war.

On Monday, following the failure of Russia and Saudi Arabia to reach an agreement on world oil prices, along with the coronavirus spread, stock markets experienced the most significant crash since 9/11, with oil prices plunging faster than at any time since the beginning of the First Gulf War in 1990. “Black Monday” led to an immediate devaluation of the ruble, which it hit a four-year low on Monday.

The Russian economy is highly dependent on the price of oil and vulnerable to fluctuations of the world economy. About 60 percent of exports and 30 percent of GDP depend upon oil and gas. While Russian officials, including the minister of the economy Anton Siluanov, have tried to assure the population that Russia can sustain its economy and budget even with a price of \$30 per barrel, it is clear that the emerging world economic crisis will dramatically accelerate what has already been a prolonged crisis of the Russian economy.

In the past five years, there has been a persistent decline of real wages as the Russian economy was in a recession from 2014 to 2016. The number of those officially classified as “extremely poor” has risen to 20 million, out of a total population of 140 million.

The crisis will be further accelerated by the social and health impact of the coronavirus pandemic, which has reached Russia officially in early March. As of Wednesday evening, there were 20 confirmed cases in 9 different cities and regions in Russia. However, as in many other countries this number is likely an understatement, given that testing has been extremely limited. In neighboring Ukraine, where only one coronavirus patient has been officially confirmed so far, a three-week full quarantine of the entire country was

announced on Thursday. In Armenia, a near neighbor of Russia in the south Caucasus, all schools have been closed.

However, Russian officials continue to downplay the developing crisis. The vice-prime minister Tatyana Golikova, speaking on state television last weekend, called the possible spread of the coronavirus to Russia an “absolutely overblown story.”

So far, Russia has implemented very limited measures to contain the spread of the virus. In Moscow, where over 1,000 people are quarantined, events with more than 5,000 people are banned. Flights to and from four European countries with the most serious outbreaks (France, Italy, Germany and Spain) have been banned.

The attempts by Russian officials to downplay the crisis are the result of a combination of irrationality and complacency, and the very real fear of the massive social and political consequences of a broad coronavirus outbreak.

The restoration of capitalism in the USSR and decades of further cuts have devastated the health care system Russia and throughout the region. Medical facilities have been depleted of funds, meaning they have outdated and insufficient equipment. The number of hospital beds has been cut dramatically, even though Russia still has more beds per 1,000 than countries like Italy or the US.

In addition, the Russian population is overall in poor health. Since the 1990s, previously eradicated diseases such as tuberculosis and diphtheria have again seen outbreaks on an epidemic level. Russia has also been the site of the most dramatic HIV epidemic outside of sub-Saharan Africa, with estimates putting the number of those infected at 2 million or more. The average life expectancy is 71.6 years, 5 years less than in the US or EU. For men, it is only a little above 65 years.

The coronavirus pandemic, combined with the world economic crisis, is thus set to take a massive toll in the population, triggering mass social and political unrest. This is why the Russian oligarchy is trying to prepare by strengthening its authoritarian rule.

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