

The vote on the constitutional amendments in Russia:

# Kremlin pushes to massively strengthen power of the president

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On July 1, a seven-day long vote on constitutional changes first proposed by Russian president Vladimir Putin in January, was concluded. According to official numbers by the Kremlin, 77.92 percent voted in favor. This is significantly more than polls in the lead-up to the vote had indicated, which regularly put support for the changes at between 35 and 45 percent of voters. Voter turnout reportedly stood at 67.97 percent.

The vote had initially been scheduled for April 22 but was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The last lockdown restrictions in Moscow, the capital, had been lifted just last Monday, even as cases have continued to skyrocket, to enable the Kremlin to hold both the victory parade and the referendum.

The Kremlin tried hard to fraudulently present the constitutional changes as a means of improving the living standards of the impoverished population. Clauses like the indexation of pensions and a reference to the fact that the minimum wage in Russia cannot be lower than the minimum subsistence level were heavily advertised. However, both points have, in fact, long been contained in other legislation and are systematically violated on a daily basis. Their introduction into the text of the Constitution does not restrain the authorities in any way in further ruthless attacks on the living standards of the population.

The approximately 200 amendments affect about 60 per cent of the articles in the Constitution, increasing its text by a factor of 1.5. The most significant of these changes vastly strengthen the powers of the President. The President gets the uncontrolled right to appoint all the power ministers (defence, interior, FSB, etc.). At the same time, he only "consults" with the Federation Council (upper house of parliament) in their appointment.

The terms of President Putin, who has been President

since 2000 with a four-year intermission in 2008-2012, are "reset" so that he can now run for president twice more, allowing him to potentially stay in power until 2036. He and Dmitry Medvedev, the former President and prime minister, are granted lifelong immunity.

The President gains direct control over the government by "exercising general management" of its work. The diminished role of the prime minister is complemented by the right of the president to remove the prime minister without resigning the government as a whole – as Putin did with Dmitry Medvedev's cabinet in January. As a result, the prime minister, nominally the second face of the state, is becoming a virtually completely dependent presidential creation.

The widely advertised expansion of the powers of the State Duma (lower chamber of parliament) is nothing but a verbal trick. If the Duma does not "approve" candidates that have been nominated by the president three times, the president's personnel decisions come into effect automatically. He can dissolve the Duma itself and announce new elections.

After years of growing tensions between the Kremlin and the regional elites, the constitutional changes also provide for a significant limitation of the powers of the regional and municipal authorities. The President not only appoints judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts, but now also has the right to appoint prosecutors in the regions. In the past, this used to be the exclusive prerogative of the Prosecutor General's Office. Any autonomy of the municipal authorities will also be abolished. Municipal deputies will now become de facto government officials.

Another set of amendments to the Constitution are aimed at promoting notions that are traditionally associated with extreme right-wing ideology. Such

amendments include a reference to God, which undermines the declared secular nature of the state, the characterization of marriage as "a union of a man and a woman", as well as a clause declaring Russian as "the language of the nation that is constitutive to the state".

The latter is just a slightly veiled formulation that declares the Russian people "state-forming" - a formulation characteristic of ultra-right parties, such as the fascist party Pamyat which was active during Gorbachev's *perestroika* period in the last years of the Soviet Union. It was no coincidence that it was fully supported by the ultra-nationalist Stalinist Communist Party (KPRF) of Gennady Zyuganov.

A number of new paragraphs – for example, the abolition of the priority of norms of international law – contradict articles of the Constitution which are part of its so-called "protected" sections.

The national referendum over the changes to the Russian Constitution was a shameful and thoroughly anti-democratic farce. There is no legal basis for either the advancement of the constitutional changes, which were initiated in January, or the mechanism of a national discussion and vote. Instead, they were enacted on the basis of a specially drafted document. The changes and the referendum provide a pseudo-legal cover for a massive escalation of the push toward ever more open dictatorial forms of rule.

The vote was conducted under conditions in which the coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the country. Whatever the propagandistic announcements in the media that the pandemic is "going away", Russia still ranks as the country with the third-highest number of confirmed cases in the world. There are now over 650,000 cases and more than 9,500 people have died. Over the past month, every day between 7,000 and 9,000 new infections were recorded. On July 1, the highest number of deaths in three months was reported at 216. The vote, much like last month's victory parade, in which basic social distancing measures were not observed, will likely drive up infections further.

While trying to simulate the supposed stability and strength of the regime, the referendum and constitutional changes in fact grow out of an enormous crisis of the Russian oligarchy. The vote took place amid an unprecedented breakdown of world capitalism which has escalated class tensions in every country and is further fueling the imperialist drive to war, especially against Russia and China. Approval ratings for Putin have been plummeting as the coronavirus pandemic has thrown

millions out of work and many more into utter destitution. Hospitals in Russia have been devastated by the pandemic, revealing the catastrophic implications of the restoration of capitalism and decades of austerity.

Under these conditions, the Russian oligarchy seeks to solidify the power of Putin as a figure that can balance between different warring factions of the ruling elite, while at the same time fostering extreme nationalism and strengthening authoritarian rule in anticipation of major confrontations with the working class.

The crisis of the oligarchy and the drive toward dictatorship ultimately grow out of the Stalinist counter-revolution against the October Revolution of 1917, and the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and restoration of capitalism at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Contrary to the assertions of the Stalinist and imperialist propaganda at the time, the privatization of former state property and the dismembering of the Soviet Union were not the basis for the flourishing of democracy and general welfare, but, on the contrary, provided the basis for unprecedented plunder of social resources and the emergence of a new ruling layer of criminal and thoroughly parasitic oligarchs. The 1993 Constitution was the pseudo-legal codification of this counterrevolution and the established capitalist property relations.

Under Putin, the oligarchy has further enriched itself. The Boston Consulting Group recently published its Global Wealth report which found that the personal wealth of Russia's super-rich has increased 16-fold over the past 20 years, from \$0.1 trillion to \$1.6 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 14% between 1999 and 2014.

At the same time, according to Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, the median salary in the country is around 18,000 rubles (\$255). At least half of all families are struggling to make ends meet. In March, President Putin announced that people with an income 1.5 times the minimum wage, which is just over 12,000 rubles (\$170) a month, should be considered the "middle class".

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