

PUTIN BEGINS NEW PHASE IN CAMPAIGN TO RETAIN POWER



OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Vladimir Putin's current term as Russia's President expires in 2024. Over the past two weeks, Putin reshuffled Russia's government, proposed a set of major changes to the Russian constitution, and pledged significant social spending. ISW's Russia Team Lead Nataliya Bugayova describes how this reshuffling fits into Putin's campaign to retain power and the subsequent vulnerabilities Putin will face as he manages this transition.

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch. A podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I'm your host for this episode.

In 2024, Vladimir Putin's current term as Russia's president expires. Putin chose to kick off this year with a series of changes in how the Russian government operates. Is it all smoke and mirrors, or is something else driving the changes? The Russia Portfolio Lead at ISW, Nataliya Bugayova, joins the show to help us make sense of Putin's announcement and his planning for the future.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Today we'll focus on providing context for Vladimir Putin's recent power play. Over the past two weeks put in reshuffled Russia's government, proposed a set of major changes to the Russian constitution, and pledged significant social spending. Putin has essentially begun a new phase in his campaign to retain power after 2024, when his current term expires. Putin has long been setting conditions for this. In fact, he personally, and his associates, have been priming the information space with the idea of constitutional change for several years now.

The fact that Putin came out with these changes was not unexpected. What is significant, however, is the process substance and the context in which Putin is making his power play. Five key points I would like to share with you today on what Vladimir Putin is likely trying to achieve and what to watch for going forward. First, Putin essentially proposed a revised social contract for the Russian people, which was overdue given that the popular support for the Crimea and his other foreign adventures started to fade.

So this refresh contract is massively increase social spending in exchange for growing government control, and further isolation of Russia. Putin pledged increase government support for education and population growth. Putin's decision to reshuffle his cabinet was also likely in part a populous move, intended to shift the blame for failed economic reforms over the past few years to former PM Dmitry Medvedev. And also signal that Putin is committed fresh energy behind his agenda.

Now Putin combined these pledges with amendments that will further limit civil liberties of Russians and isolate the country. For example, Putin's changes might provide Russia with freedom to ignore decisions of international organizations such as, for example, European Court of Human Rights. Putin is also likely trying to limit already nearly non-existent political opposition. For example, now only those who have resided in Russia for the past 25 years will be allowed to run for president.

Putin's changes might also stretch the arm of the federal government further down into the regions. Under his amendments, regional legislation might no longer be able to have a say in the appointments of regional prosecu-

tors. It is also interesting to know that one of the first moves of the new Prime Minister Mishustin, was to introduce bonuses for members of Russia Security Services, particular National Guard, for those who work to keep order at the protest and other mass events. This indicates that Security Services will continue to be the core pillar of Putin's regime going forward.

Second, most of Putin's constitutional amendments are primarily aimed at changing the relative power of different branches of Russia's government. As Putin likely seeks to carve out a new optimal spot for himself after 2024. The parliament's powers will nominally increase. The president's still remains strong, though Putin did limit future presidents to two terms total, ensuring that there won't be another Putin, who himself ruled for four terms. One of the most significant changes is Putin's proposal to provide constitutional authority to govern to the state console, which currently is just an advisory body that consists of regional governance. This effectively introduces a new variable into Russia's political equation. The devil will be in the details, however, and the actual political configuration will greatly depend on the final content of Putin's proposed changes which are currently unclear.

The new powers of the state console, for example, are still undetermined. The exact timing and the process by which the Russian people will vote to support these changes is also unclear. Which brings me to a key point, the fact that we're likely observing a major information operation by Vladimir Putin as he advances his plan. So first, Putin is revealing his plan in a controlled piecemeal manner. He shared contours of his changes, but a lot of details are still unclear.

Additionally, he's moving rapidly to advance his plan. It only been two weeks and Putin has already announced, discussed publicly, and got approval for his changes from the Russian parliament, leaving very little actual room for public to meaningfully understand the broader implications of these changes. So Putin likely chose this approach, rushing through this changes while revealing them in piecemeal in order to protect himself during a period of potential vulnerability.

It is there important to recognize that Putin is actually in uncharted territory. Putin chose not to remove term limits on his presidency, which would have been a damaging but not impossible political move, and would have allowed him to remain a president beyond 2024. Putin is thus trying to create a new transition model for Russia, with little reference point and model in which he likely wants to retain his power, but outside of the presidency and also without destabilizing Russia.

Putin's voter base and his regime so far have reacted positively to his plan, as we see his rating going up again. And also his regime swiftly implemented these changes. That said, there are a number of vulnerabilities, however, including Putin's ability to maintain perception of his legitimacy over the next four years and after 2024. The question of how Putin will control some of the key which is Security services, they're a key element of his regime. And also the broader question of testing the limits of informal power in Russia when Putin is no longer president, who has a support of the voters.

My initial assessment of what Putin is trying to build is a facade of a strong presidency, but infrastructure behind the scenes that would allow Putin to still call the shots and maintain power. It might be one role, such as the head of an empowered state console or a combination of roles, for example on the state console and also on Russia Security Console. But the final configuration is still to be determined.

Here's a couple of things to watch for and the main questions to ask as we observe situation going forward. What will the final changes be, and what will they do to the absolute and relative power of each government body? How

will the changes be passed? And will Putin succeed at legitimizing them through the popular vote of some sort? We're also interested specifically in what the new status and the role of the state console will be, specifically its binding authority. How will Putin resolve inherent vulnerabilities we just discussed? And finally how will Putin's base, both his voters but also his power structures, react as he further unfolds his plan over the next few years?

Maseh Zarif:

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