

Putin's address and the government's resignation: the start of the succession process in Russia

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On 15 January, the Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his annual address to the Federal Assembly (the combined chambers of parliament). This year's speech was relatively short (70 minutes), and was focused on two themes: improving the social situation and amendments to the constitution (a popular vote on this matter will be held). This time, questions of foreign and security policy were relegated to the margins of Putin's speech. The President also made a passing reference to the subject of historical policy.

Soon after the speech finished, the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev along with the entire government was announced. At Putin's request, Medvedev will continue to fulfil the duties of prime minister until a new government is appointed. At the same time, Putin proposed to Medvedev that he should become deputy head of the Security Council (an advisory body to the President in the field of national security; this function must be created by a decree of the President, who is the *ex officio* chairman of the SC). For the position of new Prime Minister Putin nominated Mikhail Mishustin, who had previously served as the head of the Federal Tax Service. Mishustin was approved by the State Duma on January 16, and president Putin signed the decree appointing him the new Russian PM.

The key points in Putin's speech

In the sphere of social policy, the President acknowledged the demographic problem as a key question for Russia's further development ("the fate of Russia, our historical prospects, will depend on how many of us there will be"), while also emphasising its axiological dimension associated with the propagation of traditional values, based on the role of families as the bulwark of society and the individual.

Putin presented an extensive programme of social pledges intended to stimulate population growth and support families, especially those with many children. These proposals included an increase in social benefits for children of low earners; an extension of the period for granting aid to children from 3 to 7 years; an increase in the so-called maternity capital (this will now cover the first child, and be increased by 30% for the second child (up to 616,000 roubles, i.e. US\$10,000; in the case of families who have a third child, the state is obliged to repay mortgages of 450,000 roubles, i.e. US\$7300); increased availability of childcare facilities; guarantees that all children in grades 1 to 4 will receive free hot meals in schools; expanding the application in the regions of the so-called social contract (based on paying

out social benefits, offering assistance in education and finding employment); developing a programme for training teachers; developing the educational infrastructure; providing free high-speed internet in schools; and paying supplemental wages for class teachers.

The Russian President referred to the condition of the health service and the availability of medical care, which has caused serious controversy and led to protests from both patients and doctors. In his assessment, a technological breakthrough has been made in this field in Russia, leading to an increase in life expectancy to 73 years (8 years higher than when Putin took office in 2000) as well as a historic low in infant mortality. Putin announced the further modernisation of the health care system, which will cost 550 billion roubles (US\$9 billion); increased availability of medical care, especially in the provinces; improvements in living conditions for doctors; and the increased availability of medicines.

Economic issues took up little space in Putin's speech. The President placed them in a social context, declaring that the aim of economic policy over the next few years would be to raise people's incomes, by means including increases in investment. He declared that in 2021 Russia's GDP growth would be higher than the average global level. He also announced that the federal budget would pay compensation for the regional budgets (2/3 of their expenses for tax relief for investors), the simplification of procedures for doing business, and the elimination of vague provisions in the Penal Code concerning economic crime.

In the realm of domestic policy, Putin focused on the issue of **constitutional amendments**. He ruled out the adoption of a new constitution, but announced the introduction to the current constitution (which dates from 1993) of a number of amendments, intended to increase the powers of the legislature while maintaining a 'strong presidential republic' (in Putin's opinion Russia is too vast and diverse to be effectively governed as a parliamentary republic). The package of amendments, if adopted as constitutional laws, would be put to the vote in a popular vote.

Some of the amendments proposed by Putin:

- legislation would be introduced to the constitution reaffirming its primacy over the decisions of international bodies and international conventions. These decisions would apply in Russia only to the extent that they do not contradict the provisions of the constitution (which has already been confirmed in existing Russian legislation and judicial practice);
- the State Duma would not only give consent to the president to appoint the new PM, but would vote to appoint the presidential candidate for the Prime Minister itself, and (at the PM's request) approve candidates for the offices of deputy prime ministers and ministers. The President would have no right to refuse to nominate candidates for cabinet members approved by parliament (at present the President appoints the head and members of the government without any real supervision by the parliament), but he would retain the right to dismiss the Prime Minister and members of the government if they perform their duties improperly or lose the confidence of the head of state;
- the heads of the so-called institutions of force would be nominated by the President after consultation with the Federation Council (the upper chamber of Parliament, which is

made up of representatives from the Russian regions);

- the Federation Council would also hold consultations on the President's candidates for the regional prosecutors' offices (at present they are consulted with the regional legislative assemblies, which in Putin's opinion risks entangling the prosecutors in regional coteries);
- the Constitutional Court would, at the President's request, have the right to assess the constitutionality of laws (even before the President signs the laws adopted by parliament), as well as the executive acts of the laws;
- the Federation Council, at a proposal from the President, could remove judges on the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court from office if they commit acts which are in serious violation of their office, or in other cases provided for in the constitutional law;
- the constitution should include requirements that persons holding the highest state positions should not hold foreign citizenship or the right to permanent residence abroad. These would apply to deputies of the State Duma and the Federation Council, heads of regions (governors), the Prime Minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers of the federal government, heads of other state bodies, and judges. Candidates for the position of President of the RF would be required to reside on the territory of Russia for at least 25 years, and the ban on holding foreign citizenship or the right to permanent residence abroad would apply not only at the moment when the candidate formally files for the post, but also retrospectively;
- a provision would be introduced to prevent a person from holding the office of President for more than two terms (in general, and not just 'consecutively', as stated in the current provision in the constitution);
- the constitution would include the principle of 'a uniform system of public authority', applying to government at different levels, federal, regional and municipal. According to Putin, this would increase the efficiency of interaction between the municipal level and the higher levels. The power of the authorities at the municipal level would be expanded;
- the role of governors in decision-making at the federal level would be enhanced; also, the State Council would be included into the Constitution, and its status and role would be specified (the State Council, introduced in 2000, is an advisory body to the President which assembles the heads of the regions and the heads of both chambers of parliament, the President's plenipotentiary representatives in the federal districts, and the heads of the parliamentary factions in the State Duma);
- a provision would be introduced into the constitution stating that the minimum wage cannot be lower than the subsistence minimum as calculated for people of working age, and that pensions should be index-linked (so far, this principle has only been enshrined in a legal act).

In the sphere of **foreign policy**, the President only briefly and vaguely repeated his standard ideas about instability in the world, Russia's openness and non-aggression, and its successes in the development of arms. He stressed that defending Russia's security protects its development, and that "the greatness of Russia cannot be separated from the wellbeing of its citizens".

Putin also briefly raised the issue of **historical policy**, recalling the special role of the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. The President stated that this triumph was an important inspiration for the nation, for its future and the preservation of its unity. He declared his will to “defend the truth” of history from “blatant lies”. He also announced that a set of multimedia archives on historical topics, accessible to all citizens, would be created.

Commentary

- This year’s message should be treated as a response to the worsening social climate, as an informal introduction to the campaign for next year’s parliamentary elections and, above all, as a start to the process of managing the succession of power in Russia (at present the full scenario is unclear; Putin’s current term will expire in 2024, and according to the current constitution he will be unable to stand in the next presidential election).
- The resignation of Medvedev’s government and the announcement of his move to the Security Council of the Russian Federation are also part of the succession narrative. Both the legal and institutional changes and the personnel reshuffle will be part of this process. This ‘castling’ is intended to reinforce the feeling of renewal carried out by the President and give credence to the social promises he has made. At the same time the announcement that a new, very important position will be created for Medvedev in an influential body (the Security Council) within the Russian power system means that he will remain an important member of the ruling group.
- Putin’s speech was clearly divided into two parts. The first focused on new elements of social policy (a comprehensive package of promises), and is intended to demonstrate the government’s concern for its citizens and neutralise the deteriorating social climate. This should be seen as the Kremlin’s response to the fall-off seen in recent years in public interest in the geopolitical agenda and their focus on internal problems (particularly social causes) which has reduced the President’s approval ratings and led to an increase in protest activity. Putin is seeking to achieve a propaganda effect and strengthen his image as a caring and socially sensitive leader, but putting the majority of social demands onto the shoulders of the regions makes it less likely that they will be implemented.
- The final scope of the constitutional changes put forward in the second part of the speech will be discussed over the coming years, and may be subject to change. The President’s proposals seem to have the following objectives:
 - **to initiate the process of institutional changes relating to the succession of power expected in 2024**, including a certain expansion of the powers of the legislative branch, strengthening the role of the State Council, and limiting the independence of the judiciary. The reduction in presidential powers and the tightening-up of the conditions to run for this office may indicate that **Putin has probably made a preliminary decision to abandon the extension of his presidency after 2024, but will look for a new place for himself within the power system which will leave the dominant influence on state policy in his hands after that date;**

- **to discipline the ruling elite** by making it compulsory for officials to relinquish foreign citizenships and residence permits, and thus to choose between their loyalty to the state and the security of their assets & the personal safety of members of the elite and their families. Further, it cannot be ruled out that it is also aimed at **renewing or rejuvenating the elite**, and opening up channels for the promotion of its younger members (the issue of blocked career paths is often raised as an objection to, and proof of, the ossification of the Putin system);
 - **to revive competition within the ruling elite** (by strengthening the role of parliament), which would help in the selection of new, efficient government staff before the succession of power in 2024;
 - **to refresh the ossified political system**, at least for image purposes (as a signal to the public);
 - **to discipline the regional leaders** (changing the procedure to nominate regional prosecutors; and strengthening the municipal level, which could also mean the liquidation of the remnants of local government in the light of the demand for a 'uniform system of public authority').
- The marginal place for foreign policy in this year's speech must, on one hand, be treated as a desire to continue the current policy, and on the other as a response to public expectations that the authorities focus their attention on domestic, mainly social problems.
 - The speech's reference to the upcoming 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany and the announcement of the fight against the 'falsification of history' confirm that Russia's aggressive campaign of political propaganda concerning recent history (including that directed against Poland) will continue. We should expect this to culminate with the celebrations in Moscow on 9 May 2020.