EUROPE 16.03.2020 | Peer Teschendorf

Putin: President in perpetuity?

Putin's constitutional coup ensures that he could remain in power until 2036. But Russia's young generation wants change

Read this article in German.

Russian President Vladimir Putin could be 84 years old by the end of his last term of office. At that point, he will have ruled for 36 years. Or at any rate, that would be a real possibility after the changes to the constitution passed last week. Young voters in particular are dismayed by this prospect.

Putin had already announced changes to the constitution in a speech to the nation on 15 January. The '2024 problem' – that is, the end of Vladimir Putin's final term in office – has increasingly been the dominant political question in Moscow. Therefore, the constitutional amendment has been primarily associated with a shift in power. The president spoke of strengthening the parliament and the creation of a new constitutional organ, the State Council whose sessions have been unofficial so far. There were many options as to how Putin could continue to influence the fate of the country after he left the presidency.

The changes, which were worked out in great haste, made it clear that by no means would his office be weakened by the changes. On the contrary, the mere improvement in the ability to influence the Constitutional and Supreme Court appointments further shifts the balance of power in favour of the president. Ultimately, potential problems that could arise in the event of an unfavourable majority in the Duma were eliminated. The presidential system was made even more crisis-proof.

It's just an option

In the past, however, an extension of the term of office for presidents was rejected on several occasions. Many analysts also considered it too risky. After all, the manoeuvre whereby Putin and Medvedev simply exchanged offices had already led to massive protests.

Resetting terms of office, however, would undermine a basic principle of the constitution: that power should be limited in time.

Accordingly, Valentina Tereshkova's proposal for the ruling party, United Russia, came as a great surprise at the beginning of last week. Tereshkova is better known as the first woman in space than as a political heavyweight. Now she announced that things should not be so complicated – the incumbent president should have the opportunity to run again. A simple resetting of the clock back to zero after the amended constitution enters into force would prove decisive for Putin's hold on power.

Vladimir Putin hurried to Parliament and delivered a speech that was amazingly well prepared in view of the scarce time available, emphasising how important the possibility of a regime change is. In times of crisis, however, one must remain flexible. He would therefore have no objection to re-setting the terms of office if the Constitutional Court considered it legitimate. He did not say whether he intended to make use of it. He concluded by indicating that there is still a lot of good that can be achieved together by 2024 – and after that we shall see.

What's the point?

This debate is problematic in several respects. This step would directly contradict what Putin himself has repeatedly declared. It will not strengthen trust on the part of the population. From a constitutional point of view, the move is controversial at the least. So far, the official line was that the constitution wouldn't be fundamentally changed. In such a case, only parliamentary approval is required and no constituent assembly.

Resetting terms of office, however, would undermine a basic principle of the constitution: that power should be limited in time. As early as 1996, the Constitutional Court denied a theoretical additional term, even though then-President Yeltsin had begun his first term in the later dissolved Russian Soviet Republic and thus under a completely different constitution. At that time, the constitutional court treated the limitation of the president's term of office to two legislative periods as being absolutely fundamental to Russian democracy.

And since the Kremlin is reactive with regards to the mood of the population, a change in

The question of whether last week's turnaround was planned from the start or only because of the current situation is of secondary importance. The crucial question rather is: what is it intended to achieve?

the highest office of the state can be expected earlier than 2036.

Stability first

In his spontaneous speech, Putin himself spoke of longer terms in the United States, referring to President Roosevelt, who has been the only US president to have held office for more than two terms. Putin is therefore making a comparison to the global economic crisis and World War II – in other words, dramatic times call for stability. But are these times equally dramatic? Russia is facing considerable economic problems because of the slow modernisation of the economy, sanctions, the oil price war with Saudi Arabia and the potential worldwide recession – but it is not at war.

It's also questionable whether the constitutional change will bring about more stability. On the one hand, it tones down the already debilitating discussion about Putin's succession and lowers the risk of the president's loss of authority, which becomes conceivable after his term in office comes to an end. He now has the opportunity to implement, test and perfect the new constitutional configuration and to clarify the question of succession at a time of his choosing.

On the other hand, the political guiding principle of Russia – 'stability comes first' – is less and less effective. The people want change, as shown by the opinion polls of the Lewanda independent research institute. 59 per cent of Russians consider fundamental changes to be necessary. There is a generation coming of age that is less and less shaped by the turmoil of the 90s and sees stagnation as a burden. And to bring about change, they are more frequently taking to the streets. This generation, along with all Russians who hope for social development, fail to be encouraged by an attitude of 'Just carry on.'

In the long run, the political elite will need to trust the people's power of reason, allow public scrutiny and genuine competition among the elites. Anything else amounts to only temporary stability. And since the Kremlin is reactive with regards to the mood of the population, a change in the highest office of the state can be expected earlier than 2036. Whether this will involve any real competition for power is another question entirely.



Peer Teschendorf

Berlin

Peer Teschendorf has served as the director of the offices of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Russian Federation since 2018. From 2012 to May 2016, he was heading the foundation's offices in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

-