

EUROPE

BRENDAN MCGING

RUSSIA: CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS PASS NATIONWIDE VOTE

Russia has voted in favour of constitutional amendments which will enable President Vladimir Putin to remain in power until 2036. A nationwide vote running from June 26 to July 1 returned a result of 78% in favour of the changes. It is estimated that 68% of eligible voters participated.

However, questions have been raised over the transparency of the vote. Interestingly, the vote was not required to pass the amendments into law. Both the State Duma and the Federation Council (the lower and upper houses of parliament, respectively) approved the changes back in March, as did Russia's Constitutional Court. Putin's choice to hold the nationwide vote – initially scheduled for April – is widely perceived to have been a public relations activity, designed to shore up his popular support. Putin's approval rating has been dropping in the face of the continued spread of COVID-19 in Russia.

The fact that the nationwide vote was not legally required meant that it was carried out under a far less stringent set of electoral regulations than a true national referendum would have been. Leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny has decried the official result as "fake and a huge lie", while impartial observers have raised concerns about widespread ballot-stuffing, with allegations that as many as one in four votes were illegally cast.

Critics alleging pre-determination of the result have also pointed to the fact that new amended versions of the Russian Constitution were printed and on store shelves prior to the vote, and that the result of the vote was announced before the voting period ended on July 1. These allegations have had little effect on Putin, who said the amendments are 'the right thing' and signed them into law on July 4.

WHAT ARE THE CHANGES?

There are a substantial number of changes contained in the parcel of amendments. Of greatest importance is the alteration of term limits for presidents. Previously, a president could only serve two consecutive terms of six years, with no other limitations. This enabled Putin to serve two consecutive terms as President 2000–08 (at that time presidential terms were four years long), one term as Prime Minister 2008–12, and then two terms as President again from 2012 until (presumptively) 2024.

The new amendment provides that any president can only serve two terms in total. Crucially however, it resets to zero the terms of current office holders. Consequently, Putin at the end of his current term in 2024 will be deemed to have had zero terms, and thus may hold office for two more terms ending in 2036. At that point Putin would be 83 years old and would have held power in Russia for 36 years. Putin has not yet announced any intention to run for President in the next election but has said that it is 'crucial' he have the ability to do so.

Other changes include: inserting a constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman; an explicit reference to Russians' 'faith in God'; a reference to 'protection' of the 'historical truth' of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) and a prohibition on 'belittling' the actions of those who fought in it. A clause has also been inserted ensuring the legal minimum wage is not to fall below the minimum subsistence income.

The final change of importance is a prohibition on senior government officials holding foreign citizenship, foreign residency, or foreign bank accounts. Importantly, this includes previous citizenship and residency rights, meaning that any person who has ever held foreign citizenship or residency, even if they have renounced it, is barred from senior government posts.

FRANCE: PRESIDENT MACRON CHANGES PRIME MINISTER

French President Emmanuel Macron has appointed the centre-right leaning Jean Castex as Prime Minister following the resignation of Edouard Philippe from the role on July 3. Castex has a lower public profile than the outgoing Philippe but has recently acquired the moniker 'Mr Deconfinement' after being appointed to oversee France's emergence from COVID-19 lockdown. Despite his low profile, Castex has previously served in government in high-level positions, being part of the Sarkozy administration and serving as deputy Health Minister.

It is not unusual for a change in Prime Minister to occur during a presidential term, and this is the first such change of Macron's five-year term, three years in. Such an action was widely expected in the wake of recent municipal elections where Macron's En Marche party suffered severe defeats. This move is one of Macron's first in his attempt to 'reinvent' himself and find a 'new path' in the face of declining popularity.

Macron's decision to accept Philippe's resignation, which had been rumoured to be in the works for several weeks, is all the more explicable given

events shortly after Macron did so. Mere hours after the announcement of Philippe's resignation came the news that the Law Court of the Republic would be opening an inquiry into how the government he led managed the COVID-19 pandemic. The Law Court of the Republic is the body responsible for investigating ministerial misconduct. In addition to Philippe, two other key Cabinet figures have been named as subjects of investigation: former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn, who resigned in February, and current Health Minister Olivier Véran. The Law Court is currently investigating a total of nine named individuals. Macron has yet to reveal the results of his broader Cabinet reshuffle, stating that an announcement would be made later in the week.

Macron has yet to reveal the results of his broader Cabinet reshuffle, stating that an announcement would be made later in the week.



Emmanuel Macron – Jacques Paquier (flickr.com)