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The World This Week



PUTIN'S NEW POWER PLAY?

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MEDVEDEV RESIGNS AFTER PUTIN PROPOSES CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual State of the Nation address on Wednesday, January 15, to announce proposed radical constitutional changes. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev submitted his resignation within hours, an unexpected move from the man who has held the office since 2012. Medvedev is a close ally of Putin's, having held the position of President from 2008-12 when Russia's constitutional prohibitions prevented Putin from retaining the presidency himself. Medvedev was largely seen as a figurehead during his presidency, with Putin - who Medvedev named Prime Minister for the length of his term - retaining the real power. Medvedev stepped aside in 2012 to allow Putin to return to the presidency.

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What are the constitutional changes?

Putin proposes to give Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, a greater role in appointing the PM and cabinet. Currently, the President appoints the PM, who must then be approved by the Duma. Putin also proposes an increased role for the State Council, which is currently an advisory body consisting of the heads of Russia's federal regions and is chaired by Putin. Other changes suggested include altering the two-term presidential limitation, and strengthening laws prohibiting presidential candidates that have held foreign residency visas. Many details of the proposed alterations remain unknown at this stage.

Who will be Russia's next Prime Minister?

Putin has tapped the current head of the Federal Tax Service, 53-year-old Mikhail Mishustin, for the position. A relative unknown, Mishustin is a surprise occupant of the position. Mishustin sailed through the approval process in the Kremlin-dominated Duma on January 16, with 383 votes in his favour out of a possible 424. The remaining 41 members of the Duma abstained, no one voting against Mishustin's appointment. Putin has appealed to the incumbent cabinet ministers to continue working until a new cabinet can be appointed.

Why these changes?

Many see these changes as Putin's attempt to stay in a position of power once his final term as President expires in 2024. Under the altered constitution Putin would have the ability to take the position of a more powerful Prime Minister, or perhaps take a new role such as the head of the State Council. Whatever the reason, few believe that Putin, having been in power as either president or PM since 2000, intends on quietly retiring when 2024 rolls around.

Libyan Peace Summit Held in Berlin

Representatives of sixteen nations and organisations met in Berlin on January 19 for a summit designed to help bring peace to the war-torn nation of Libya. High-ranking representatives came from concerned nations large and small, including the leaders of Russia, Turkey, France, Britain, Germany, Italy and the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, amongst others. Representatives of major international organisations were also present, including the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union and the Arab League. Most notably, the leaders of the two warring Libyan sides were present, although they refused to meet face to face.

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The UN-recognised Libyan government led by Fayez al-Sarraj only controls a small part of Libyan territory, with the remainder under the control of the rebel general Khalifa Haftar. The situation is highly complex, with numerous international powers supporting separate sides of the conflict.

The primary achievement to emerge from the summit was a commitment by those present to enforce an existing UN weapons embargo. There has been little appetite for enforcing this embargo thus far. Turkey has been sending weapons and troops to support al-Sarraj, while the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan have been supplying Haftar's rebels. Russia and, more recently, France have also both been accused of supplying Haftar's forces. A total of 55 points were agreed upon at the summit, with participants having "committed themselves to refrain from any further measures and further military support to parties that would endanger truce". It remains to see if this multinational commitment will be borne out in practice.



Dmitry Medvedev: Jürg Vollmer (flickr.com)

Turkey Illegally Drills in Cypriot Waters

Cyprus has called Turkey a "pirate state" following its unauthorised attempts to drill for natural gas in Cypriot coastal waters. The strongly worded condemnation came January 19, one day after the European Union issued a warning to Turkey not to drill illegally.

The island of Cyprus has been divided in two since a Turkish invasion in 1974. The northern part of the island is under de facto Turkish control, and has declared itself independent. However, Turkey is the only nation that recognises it. The United Nations still recognises the Republic of Cyprus as the legal government of the entire island.

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Turkey has attempted to drill illegally in Cypriot coastal waters four times over the last seven months, and most recently attempted to do so in an area already licensed for exploration to two international energy companies, one Italian and one French. The EU has responded by setting up a mechanism through which to impose sanctions on companies or individuals involved in illegal drilling.

Turkey has responded, saying that the EU is “prejudiced” against it, and that it is protecting the economic interests of Turkish Cypriots in the northern part of the island.