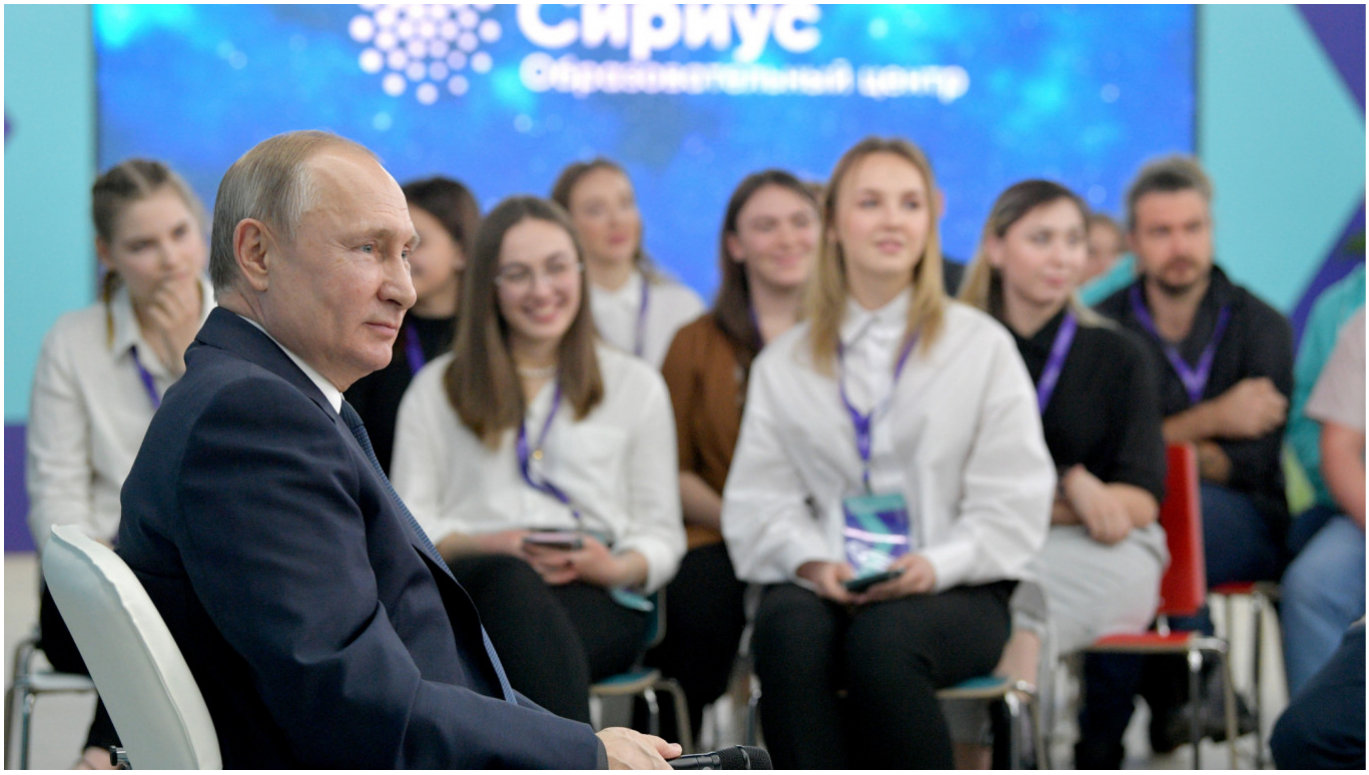
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Putin Says Russia Has to be Strong Presidential Republic

By Vladimir Soldatkin for Reuters

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Putin spoke during a meeting with students from Russia's leading universities. **Alexei Druzhinin/TASS**

Russia must remain a strong presidential republic, President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday when asked about a possible transitional period once he steps down in 2024.

Last week Putin, who under the constitution cannot run for another presidential term, proposed constitutional changes that would give him scope to extend his grip on power after leaving the presidency.

The suggestions include reducing the powers of the presidency and beefing up those of the prime minister, prompting speculation that Putin might be eyeing a return to a job he held from 2008 to 2012.

"Our country, obviously, has to be a strong presidential republic. That's the first thing. And then, we have so many ethnic groups, nationalities, ways of life, it is practically impossible to

integrate in the framework of a parliamentary republic," Putin said, in comments which seemed to contradict last week's message.

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Putin, who is 67, was speaking at a televised meeting with Russian students in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

Asked by one student whether Russia should consider setting up some kind of transitional institution as happened in Singapore, Putin said this was not appropriate for his country.

Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore, was named the Minister Mentor, an advisory position, after his retirement from active politics, to help provide stability.

"He was an outstanding man... That's true, he was, I don't know, around 30 years in power, and he founded the country, that's true... You want me to be the Minister Mentor?"

"What you propose, would undermine the institution of the presidency. I think that for such a country as Russia this is not applicable," said Putin, who has dominated Russian politics as president or prime minister for two decades.

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