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First Woman in Space Brought Down to Earth by Backlash Over Bid to Prolong Putin Rule

By Tom Balmforth for Reuters

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Tereshkova's amendment, since backed by both houses of parliament, allows Putin to ignore the current constitutional limits and run for president again in 2024, potentially opening the way for him to serve two more six-year terms consecutively. **Sergei Metelitsa / TASS**

Valentina Tereshkova was hailed as a hero when she became the first woman in space in 1963.

Now 83, she has become a hate figure for some Russians after this week putting forward a constitutional amendment that could allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036.

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At least two online petitions have been launched against her, one calling for a street named

after her to be renamed and another asking for one of her honorific titles to be revoked.

She has also been widely mocked by critics on social media.

"Tereshkova — the first woman who bravely traveled into cosmic cold and darkness, and then brought the entire country there," read one message on Twitter reposted by Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov wrote: "This whole obscene fuss over the Constitution was conceived for the sake of one moment ... two new terms for Putin. Tereshkova, who still remembers (Soviet leader Josef) Stalin well, did not disappoint."

A household name in Russia, Tereshkova, who holds an array of state honors including a Hero of the Soviet Union medal, became the world's first female astronaut in June 1963, spending 71 hours in orbit on board a Soviet Vostok spacecraft.

A staunch backer of Putin and the traditional values he has espoused, she has been a lawmaker in the lower chamber of parliament since 2011.

Her amendment, since backed by both houses of parliament, allows Putin to ignore the current constitutional limits and run for president again in 2024, potentially opening the way for him to serve two more six-year terms consecutively.

The move has been applauded by Putin's admirers but critics have accused him of plotting to stay in power for life and have blamed Tereshkova.

One petition, that has garnered nearly 8,000 signatures, calls for Tereshkova to be stripped of her title of "honorary citizen" of Tutayev, a town northeast of Moscow near where she was born.

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"...Tereshkova actively took part in the show that some people are calling a state coup," it says, adding she had discredited the honor of the town's residents.

Another, with over 3,000 signatures, calls for a Tereshkova Street in the town of Artyomovsky to be renamed.

Neither of the petitions has legal force.

Putin allies, including the leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, and the speaker of parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin, have rallied to her defense, praising her proposal and decrying the attacks on her as unpatriotic and orchestrated from abroad.

Tereshkova has branded her critics unpatriotic.

"I don't even want to talk about these people who don't love the country," she was quoted as saying by the state-run RIA news agency.

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