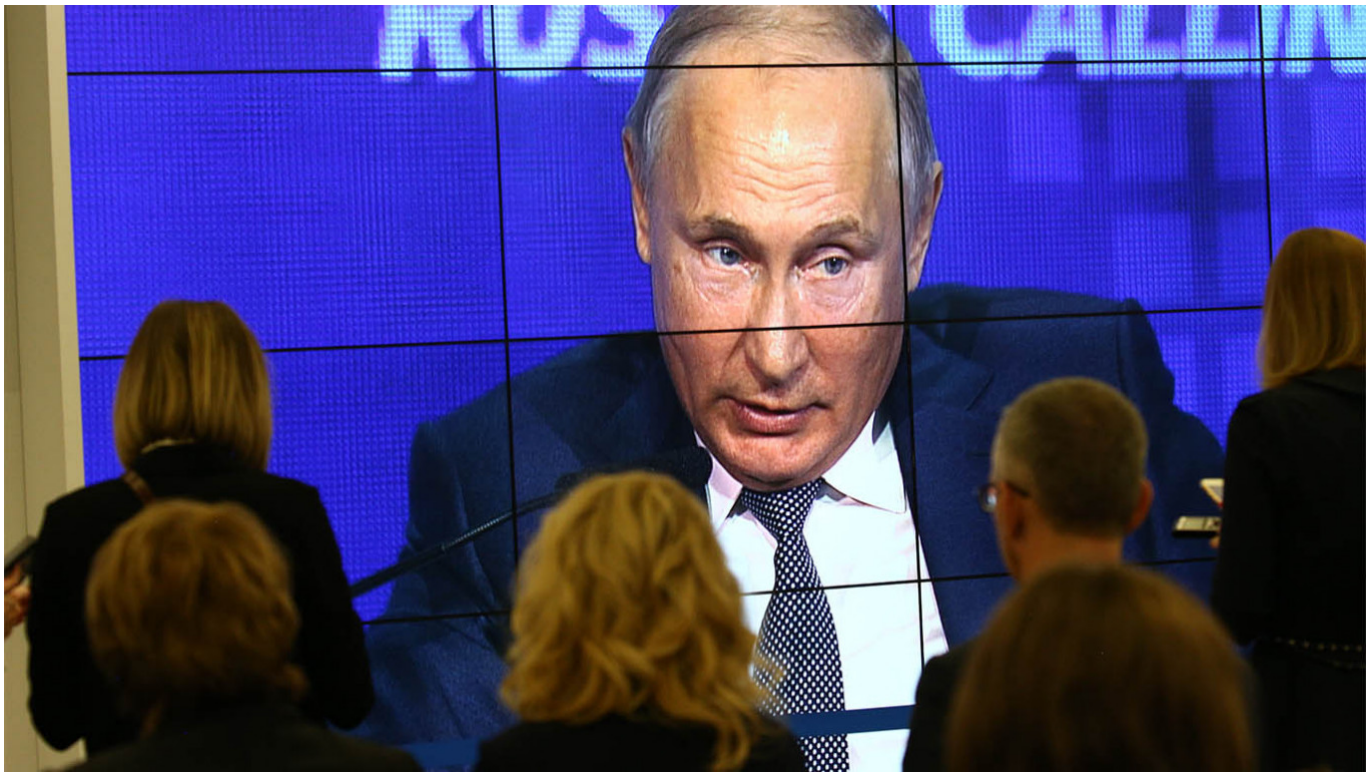
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Putin the Unstable

## Consistency and predictability in Russian politics have all but died.

By Andrey Pertsev

April 02, 2020



**Andrei Gordeyev / Vedomosti / TASS**

Throughout the many years he has been in power, the guarantee of Russian President Vladimir Putin's popularity has been his role as the custodian of stability. The president's name has been synonymous with predictability and a lack of radical change, and that setup suited most of Russian society just fine.

In 2020, however, Putin has become an outright enemy of stability. He is rewriting the rules and approving risky moves, and all for the benefit of himself and his entourage. This new, mercurial Putin is prepared to demolish the foundations for the sake of his own interests, and is losing his grip on reality.

Having somewhat controversially announced on March 17 that a nationwide vote on changing the constitution (changes that will allow him to stay in power until 2036) would go ahead on

April 22, despite the unfolding pandemic, Putin waited a full week before postponing the vote. During that week, the entire state apparatus was gradually ramping up quarantine measures. When the number of the new coronavirus cases reached hundreds, the vote was put back, but even now, Putin clearly doesn't want to take responsibility for the measures being taken to tackle the epidemic.

Announcing a week of quarantine, he described it simply as a "non-working week," and has shifted the responsibility for introducing restrictions on people's movements to regional heads, though the legal basis for doing so is dubious.

This odd reaction to the coronavirus epidemic is not the first time this year that the president has shown himself ready to risk the public good for the sake of his own plans and interests. The first sign was Putin's proposed amendments to the constitution. For years, the authorities told the Russian public that stability was their most precious asset, and that change — however well-intentioned — was dangerous, and could lead to a repeat of the turbulent decade that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin himself said repeatedly that he had no intention of changing the constitution, and certainly not to benefit himself.

Then, unexpectedly, the amendments he proposed in his address to both houses of parliament in January changed all that.

**Related article**: Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News | April 2

A few weeks later, Putin approved resetting the clock on his own presidential terms: a move that will enable him to run for president yet again in 2024, when his current term ends.

It's not really that important whether resetting the clock was in Putin's plans all along or not. What's more important is that the decision was a shock for the political system. Prior to the reset announcement, the guidelines being handed down to regional administrations on how to drum up support for the constitutional amendments appeared to signal the start of the power transition, ahead of Putin stepping down in 2024, as he was obliged to under the previous terms of the constitution.

Regional governments were told to present the amendments to voters loyal to Putin as a way of enshrining and protecting Putin's legacy, and to opposition-minded voters as a chance to vote for a new president in four years' time. Resetting the clock on terms was clearly not part of this game plan.

At the same time as Putin revealed a very different plan to that expected, he inflicted another painful blow to stability in order to further his own aims and benefit those close to him.

At the beginning of March, Russia withdrew from a deal with OPEC, causing oil prices to collapse, and with them, the ruble. The man behind this Putin-approved plan, according to Bloomberg, was Igor Sechin, the influential CEO of Rosneft oil company (and a close ally of Putin): the fall in oil prices was supposed to force shale oil producers in the United States out of the market. Other major Russian oil producers spoke out against withdrawing from the deal, predicting severe losses, but the president went ahead anyway. Once again, stability was sacrificed on the altar of calculated risk.

Putin may have diligently played the role of the guarantor of security for many years, but over time, that Putin stability had begun to be eroded. It had become increasingly obvious that this stability primarily benefited the president's inner circle, but it was still considered the lesser evil: it could always be worse.

**Related article**: As Russia Battles the Coronavirus Crisis, Why Is Putin so Absent?

The first infringement on stability came with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The status quo had clearly been upset, but the move was presented as being in line with the public will and, ultimately, the public good.

The second serious encroachment was the reform of the pension system in 2018, when the retirement age was raised immediately after the presidential elections. The Russian authorities and Putin had for many years presented the unchanging retirement age as one of the mainstays of stability — until they raised it. The ratings of the United Russia ruling party, the government, and the president all plummeted, and have not recovered in the two years since.

The events of 2020 have definitively transformed Putin from the guarantor of stability into its main threat. The president has taken manual control of politics, relying primarily on his own calculations and the advice of his inner circle. These decisions are rocking both politics and the economy, but Putin is now far removed from reality, and doesn't see the approaching storm.

Putin's recent address to the nation regarding the coronavirus outbreak was also rejected. Even loyal businessmen were indignant at the announcement of a nationwide non-working week for employees, without any offer of compensation from the state.

For now, the system is still putting up resistance: officials have convinced Putin to postpone the nationwide vote, and oil executives tried to persuade him not to withdraw from the OPEC deal, though as this latter example shows, the president often gets his own way. Consistency and predictability in Russian politics have all but died.

Something extraordinary is unfolding right before people's eyes: one immutable value (Putin) is destroying another (stability). The Russian people are not only being asked whether they approve of resetting the clock on presidential terms. They must also decide what is more valuable to them: the president himself or stability? Or, to put it another way: Putin instability or non-Putin stability?

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/02/putin-the-unstable-a69837