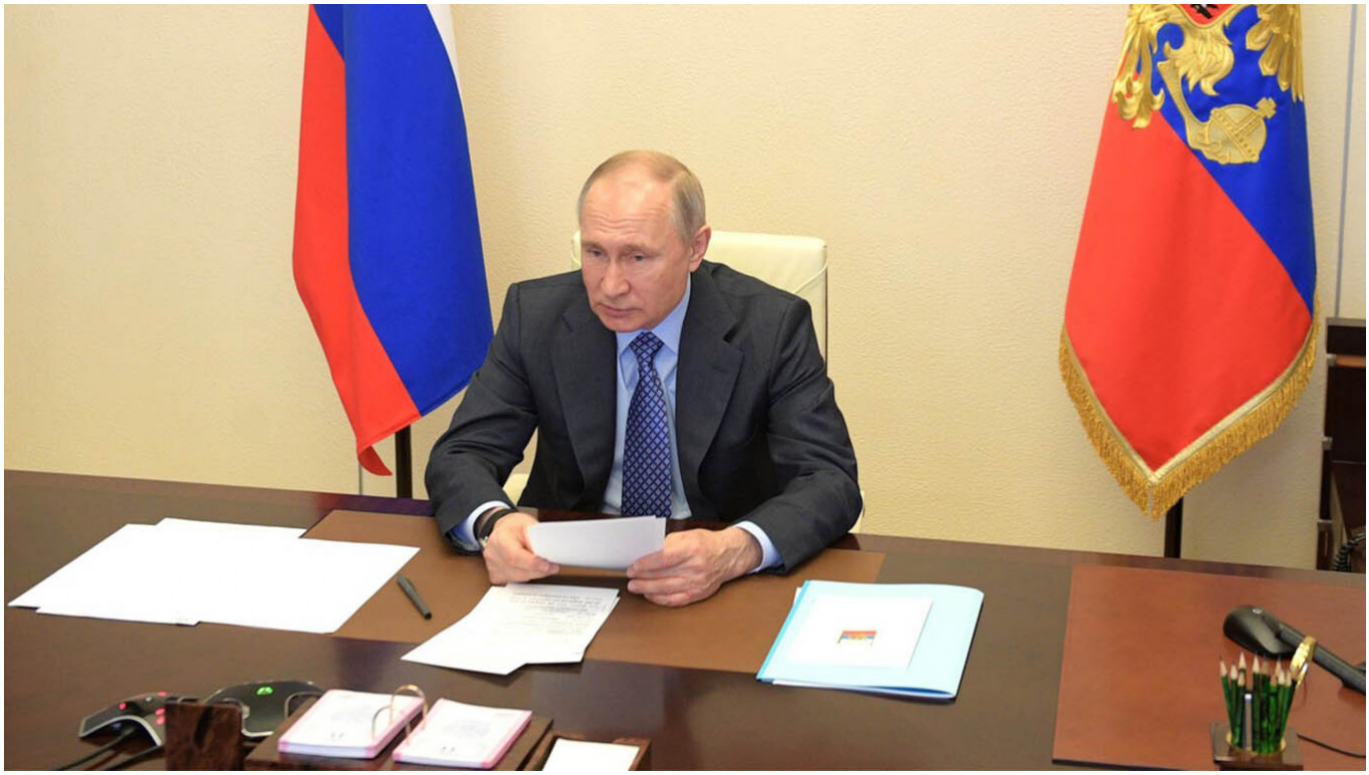
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Coronavirus Spoils Putin's 'Forever-in-Power' Public Vote

With tens of millions of Russians struggling financially, Putin shouldn't expect an enthusiastic turnout for his constitutional amendments

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The Russian opposition has three beliefs that have become almost cliché over the long 20 years of President Vladimir Putin's rule. The first is that the Putin regime will collapse because of this or that unpleasant news. Second, although Kremlin leaders are doing well right now, they'll catch hell when oil prices fall (not a go-to sentiment at the moment, for understandable reasons). Third, Putin has finally driven himself into a zugzwang (invariably uttered with undisguised relish).

'Zugzwang' is chess term meaning that no matter what move you make, your position will

only get worse. A German invention, it is not unlike "schadenfreude" and "weltanschauung" that also pack lots of meaning into a single jaw-breaking word.

Although Gary Kasparov is the only member of Russia's liberal opposition famous for his love of chess, they are all madly fond of exclaiming: "Aha! My dear Mr. Putin, you have really put yourself into a zugzwang this time!"

I count no fewer than 100 times that liberal newspapers (all three and a half of them) have declared Putin caught in a zugzwang. By this logic, the man is nothing short of a grandmaster because he has managed to extricate himself from those pickles every time.

The day has finally come, however, when I join that chorus and state that Vladimir Putin — who sits God-knows-where in a bunker writing a book about the history of Poland and chatting with astronauts via video link — really does find himself in a zugzwang this time.

Although he might not be terribly worried about the coronavirus, Putin is doubtless losing sleep over the lack of resolution for his coveted constitutional amendments. His situation really does resemble the classic chess dilemma in which any move would only make matters worse.

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Judge for yourself. Vladimir Putin loves to run everything like a super-fast special op and fortune really was on his side as he began his amendments escapade.

Add to this the fact that members of the already-weakened Russian opposition were quarreling over whether it was even worth it to defend the 1993 Constitution. There were no large-scale protests or clashes between demonstrators and police. True, there were a few isolated pickets, some online petitions, various open letters to the Kremlin, and vague discontent on social networks — but they are always part of the background noise in Russia and everyone has long grown used to them.

In fact, some might have missed or even forgotten that the regional parliaments had already pushed through the necessary amendments at breakneck speed. This means they have come, de jure, into force — and this includes the amendment to "reset" the clock on Putin's terms in office, giving him the right to once again run for the presidency in 2024 and 2030.

Does that mean the Russian authorities should consider the special op a success and breathe a sigh of relief?

No. There is something Putin wants much more than just the knowledge that he has satisfied the legal formalities of his power grab. He wants every Russian to know, and publicly acknowledge, who runs the country.

Related article: Don't Vote on Putin's Constitutional Amendments, Navalny Urges Russians

So, although the popular vote was not a legal requirement for adopting these amendments,

Putin personally promised on several occasions to hold it so that he could hear the opinion of the people.

What's more, everyone understood that it was only a formality, especially because the vote would not be a referendum, but some strange pseudo-plebiscite with no oversight from independent observers permitted. In short, the result was a foregone conclusion.

Still, holding no vote at all would look bad. After all, he promised, and for him keeping his word in front of the public reflects his "street" code of honor.

And yet, with each passing week, the prospects for such a vote seem increasingly distant.

Tens of millions of Russians have lost all or part of their incomes, sit home in isolation, and receive no financial assistance from the federal center — unlike their counterparts in the West.

Now imagine if, after all that, the Kremlin suddenly announced that citizens could briefly emerge from their cages and trek to polling places to register their feelings towards those authorities. It's an interesting prospect, isn't it? Of course, the authorities could simply toss all the "no" votes into the trash but that would be a risky move if more than, say, 50 percent of the people had opposed the amendments.

If this isn't a zugzwang, I don't know what is.

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