

# DECIPHERING THE MOVES ON RUSSIA'S POWER CHESSBOARD

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Russian President Vladimir Putin. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

Just as the countdown to the end of Russia's Vladimir Putin's presidential term draws close, he has announced major changes in three directions: constitutional changes; reshuffling his close aides and policy makers; a slew of economic and social measures that will impact Russian economy and society. What are these changes and what do they say about Mr. Putin's plans for the Russian state and himself as its central figure?

These changes came in last week when Mr. Putin addressed a joint session of both houses of Parliament. The powerful Russian security council has been given a new deputy chairmanship — the chair is the president. This constitutional change is linked to the reshuffle of the men around him. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Mr. Putin's closest aide has been shifted to this newly created post. This constitutional change has to be introduced into the Duma and signed by the President. It is clear this will be done post-facto and seamlessly since the Duma is under Mr. Putin's control and his party has the majority.

Mr. Medvedev's successor is Mikhail Mishustin, 53, who worked as the head of Russia's Federal Tax Service, a largely "behind the scenes" technocrat, barely recognisable by the Russian public. It has also been stated that more cabinet changes are likely to follow.

Clearly, the constitutional change to the Security Council has been made to accommodate Mr. Medvedev, who has, since the early 1990s, worked as a close aide to Mr. Putin. In fact since the Russian Constitution had stipulated that the Russian President could serve only two consecutive terms, Mr. Medvedev was installed as President between 2008-2012 and Mr. Putin became Prime Minister. It was more than evident that not only did Mr. Medvedev keep the seat warm till he was replaced by Mr. Putin in 2012, he also did not take any decision himself, ruling by proxy for Mr. Putin. Then Mr. Medvedev again became the Prime Minister from 2012 until last week.

The question is whether Mr. Medvedev has been given an honourable exit by making him Deputy Chair of the Security Council and who Mr. Putin is grooming in a succession game, if at all, when the Putin term draws to a close. But given Mr. Putin's power and control, he keeps his moves close to his chest.

The other constitutional changes are also significant. Mr. Putin has proposed that the Russian legislature, the Duma, actually get more powers. For example, the Duma will now approve the appointment of the Prime Minister, and the President's Deputies and cabinet Ministers.

In the original Constitution the President alone nominated them. Now the Duma will have the power to endorse or reject the President's choice. However the President retains the right to suggest the names and dismiss them.

Further, the newly proposed changes also empower the State Council. The State Council worked as an assembly of Governors from federal states which met irregularly with primarily consultative powers. This body now gets constitutional status. Even as Mr. Putin announced a non-binding plebiscite on these changes, the Russian political system remains a highly

centralised presidential one.

Clearly, Mr. Putin continues to hold full control. But he is also making his legacy as a builder of constitutional institutions; by giving the Duma more powers, Mr. Putin signifies that he is moving to empower this body.

Mr. Putin also addressed the major internal security threat: the severe and continuous demographic decline (almost one million less every year). He has called the low birthrate and high mortality as unacceptable. To address demographic decline but also the stagnating Russian economy, Mr. Putin announced measures that include: All low income families with children under age seven will receive monthly cash handouts. All children till grade four in all Russian schools will get free lunch. All mothers after the birth of their first or second child will receive benefits and payments.

Besides these handouts, he announced public spending and infrastructure projects to address poverty, decrease social tensions, reduce income gaps, improve health. This will add up to 450 billion rubles (\$7.5 billion) per year in terms of public spending in Russia's yearly budget. This could stimulate the economy, address the demographic crises and kickstart the stagnation in the economy. At a time of worldwide austerity and cut in social expenditures, Mr. Putin is going against the tide. The Russian people support these measures.

So what do all these changes add up to? Some would argue that Mr. Putin's thirst for retaining control over the Russian Federation is not lessening. However, there appears to be a mixed bag. He continues with his project of strengthening the Russian state. This is what he began his career with, when he took control of a dissipating state after the Yeltsin period. He has been rightly critiqued for not building autonomous institutions, not considering a separation of powers, retaining a centralised federal system, controlling the press and promoting crony capitalist clique. But Mr. Putin and Russia also face external challenges. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the West see Russia as a major military threat and so Russia has to continue with a huge military industrial complex. Russia has sanctions against it. Mr. Putin has had to weave relations with states that are willing to ignore these sanctions. Russia's core interests in west and central Asia as also in the east with China, India and others have to be balanced. So Mr. Putin has had to work around these issues.

The truth is that while opposition and criticism has demonised Mr. Putin, he remains in control and has popular support. At a time of right-wing populisms holding power and increasing control of institutions the world over, and at a time of declining multilateralism and new threats, Mr. Putin and Russia refuse to lie down and be walked over. The word for describing Mr. Putin could be populist authoritarian. Since Mr. Putin rejects liberalism and does not have much time for procedural democracy, he would not object to this description. In this Russian chessboard, Mr. Putin plays the queen.

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