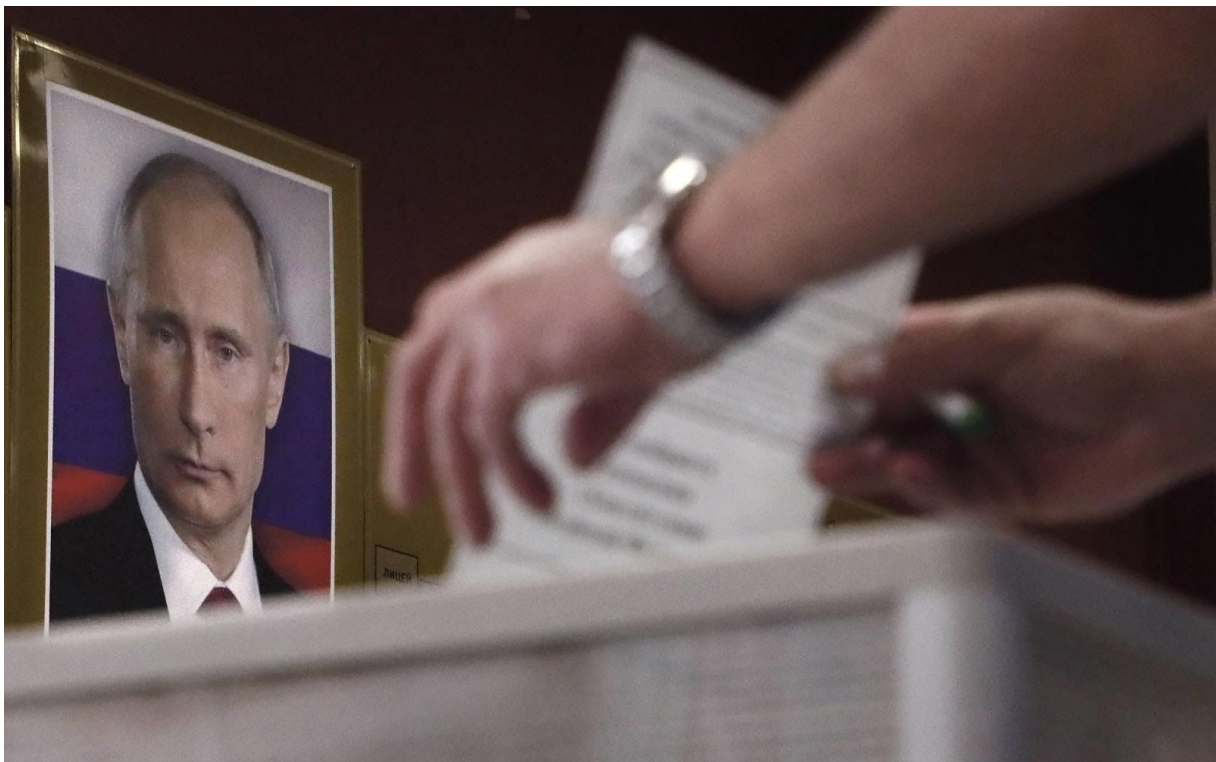


REFERENDUM - PUTIN FOR 16 MORE YEARS: AYE OR NAY

Vladimir Putin is a name that needs no introduction. He has been actively ruling the Russian Federation since the end of 1999. In the last 20 years, his country went through countless events from Moscow Theatre Siege to the annexation of Crimea. Yet, he successfully kept his votes and approval ratings at a constant high level. However, currently enjoying his 2nd term in the office, he is not eligible as a presidential candidate in the 2024 elections.

Because of the term limits of the president, designated by the Russian Constitution, no one can run for the presidency for more than 2 times in a row. Therefore, Putin proposed a constitutional amendment with the main goal of clearing his way to serve 2 more terms up until 2036. Although some articles are directly for this purpose, there are 14 articles with a variety of topics. The following are 6 examples of the most outstanding articles from the amendment:

- Removing the "in a row" clause from the article regulating the maximum number of presidential terms, discounting previous presidential terms before the amendment enters into force
- Nullifying the number of presidential terms served by the current President Vladimir Putin and former President Dmitry Medvedev to allow either to serve his first term if elected to the presidency in the 2024 presidential elections.
- The Russian Constitution shall take precedence over the international law
- The Federation Council (the upper house of Parliament) is going to be able to propose that the president dismiss federal judges; in some cases, the Federation Council, on the proposal of the president, will have the right to remove judges of the Constitutional and Supreme courts
- The nation's faith in God
- Defining marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman, therefore overruling same-gender marriages



Even though Putin's possibility of staying in power until 2036 attracted most of the criticism, the last two articles also caused controversy. The USSR had a state policy of establishing an atheist state, however, USSR's successor Russia still is a highly religious country. With the new constitutional amendment, Russia proclaims its belief in God. Although it may seem as a transition step from the former USSR, it might also be aimed to assimilate minority religions within Russia. Russian population believes in a variety of religions from Eastern Orthodoxy to Islam, from Buddhism to Tengrism and Paganism. Eastern Orthodoxy is the predominant religion among ethnic Russians with 71% of Russian citizens identifying themselves as Eastern Orthodox.

The definition of marriage as an institution between a man and a woman also caught attention. Vladimir Putin is known to be against same-sex marriages and LGBTQ+ rights. In an interview in February, he said that same-sex marriage "will not happen" as long as he is in the Kremlin. For his supporters, this attitude is necessary to protect the traditional family values, whereas it is a violation of human rights for his critics.

Seeing that his approval rating is at the lowest ever (with 59%), he wanted to pass this amendment via a referendum rather than voting it in the parliament. This is a common strategy used by politicians to further legitimize their proposals using public support. It is also an opportunity to see their public support and approval levels. Even though his current approval level of 59% is an unreachable amount for many politicians, it is considerably less than his 89% approval rating in 2015, which means he dropped 30% over the period of 5 years.

A Russian Propaganda Billboard: *"Our Country, Our Constitution, Our Decision"*

Despite being originally scheduled for April 22nd and later being delayed to July 1st amid the coronavirus concerns, the referendum was held without any serious problems. It resulted in 78,5% of people voting in favor of the amendments, with only one region (Nenets Autonomous Okrug) voting 55% against. All in all, Putin passed the changes he needed while also proving his public support once again.

In an interview on the state television, Putin strongly signaled that he would run for the presidency again in 2024. He believes that there is much more action to be taken and issues to be covered before opening the presidency to bigger political competition. He stated: "We need to get on with work, not look for successors," which clearly explains where he stands. With his age of 67, he has an open way to rule his country until the age of 83. With the same leader ruling over the country constantly, Russian politics may seem boring or unattractive for some. However, this amendment will surely have an impact on international politics. For the time being, Putin is still in.

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