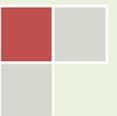


Russia uses prizes and patriotism to push vote to change constitution. There's scant mention of the real goal: keeping Putin in power.



Robyn Dixon

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MOSCOW — Russia's leaders are throwing everything at their big problem of the moment.

It's not the pandemic, even as the case count climbs. It's getting enough citizens to vote in a nationwide plebiscite on constitutional changes that could keep President Vladimir Putin in power until 2036.

The voting, which begins Thursday and wraps up July 1, is largely symbolic; the changes have already been passed by Russia's parliament. Still, the Kremlin wants a credible turnout — at least 55 percent — to give legitimacy to the project to keep Putin at the helm.

Officials are revving up all kinds of hype to stir interest.

There's the game-show approach. Vote — and get the chance to win an apartment, car, smartphone or cash prize. And there's the sweet-tooth appeal. A Moscow brochure urging people to vote includes a recipe for a pink "Moscow Cake."

Putin's breathtaking maneuver to stay in power until the year he turns 84 is masked in myriad confusing constitutional amendments including promises to increase social payments and statements on children, health care, education and Russia's view of history.

Pitches and propaganda

To pull this off, Russian has effectively put a pin in the covid-19 crisis, declaring "victory," although the confirmed case count is still rising by about 8,000 a day.

Voters, who get only a yes-or-no vote on the entire package, are being peppered with propaganda of all types urging a yes vote.

Putin knows how to rule Russia as an autocrat. He seems to stumble with pandemic.

There is a video playing to homophobic sentiment, and comical TV ads with a family arguing over whether to have a vote on the borscht. There are posters of natural beauty and the slogan “Preserve our riches.”

Even Alexander Pushkin has been dragged into it. Posters say the revered poet would have voted in favor of an amendment that enshrines Russian as the state language. A famous child figure skater, nicknamed Gnom Gnomich, has been called upon, too. He’s featured in a video with his parents marveling at Russia’s vast size on a globe (compared to tiny Austria) and urging people to vote for their children’s future.

In the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, people who vote will be entered in a raffle for one of 10 apartments and other prizes. In the “Million Prizes” giveaway in Moscow, voters can win cash.

One amendment outlaws same-sex marriage. A video, set in a fictional 2035 Russia, depicts an older woman spitting with disgust when a gay couple adopts an orphan boy. It lampoons a “new mama” who offers the small boy a dress to wear, and calls on viewers to “decide the future of the country.” The video has been banned by YouTube.

It was produced by the St. Petersburg-based Federal News Agency, which is associated with the Internet Research Agency, according to the Justice Department. A 2018 indictment on 2016 election interference said the IRA was funded by close Putin ally Yevgeniy Prigozhin.

What about Putin?

Amid the appeals to patriots, parents, sports fans, traditionalists, cake bakers, poetry lovers and environmentalists, the topic studiously buried is the removal of the constitutional limit on Putin's seeking reelection.

Putin wanted Russian science to top the world. Then came a scandal.

Even the official website on the vote omitted any mention of it until journalists noticed and asked questions. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the omission was a "technical failure."

A four-page brochure mailed to households headlined "People's Vote — Justice Stability Sovereignty" contains a crossword and a recipe for a pink glazed hazelnut and white chocolate "Moscow" cake. But there is not a word about what people here call the "zeroing" of Putin's terms — clearing the way for him to potentially have two more terms, a total of 12 years, after his current one expires in 2024.

"There are lots of amendments. One can hardly say which amendment is the main one. They are important as an aggregate," Peskov told journalists. "There must be certain initiatives that aren't mentioned in advertisements. You just need to take a closer look."

Opposition figures accuse Putin of putting his political ambitions ahead of people's lives. They warn that people could contract covid-19 at an annual World War II Victory Day parade planned for Wednesday in Moscow and the voting that begins the next day.

"The pandemic is in its full swing," said Anastasia Vasilyeva, head of an opposition-aligned independent doctors union. "In certain regions, the situation is catastrophic. But the scariest thing is that they are calling on all people to come and vote for the constitutional amendments."

“Thousands of billboards all over the country, popular bloggers, advertising in social networks and on TV, everyone is calling on people to come to polling stations,” she added. “They try to convince people that it is not dangerous.”

Russia is allowing online voting. But critics claim that will enable a manipulation of the count.

'Ritual of obedience'

Perhaps the most scathing criticism came from Dmitry Glukhovsky, author of the cult fantasy dystopian trilogy that begins with the book “Metro 2033.” Set in a post-apocalyptic world where survivors shelter in the crumbling Moscow underground, it portrays desperate people who are ultimately betrayed by a ruthless and secretive authoritarian power.

FAQ: Is a U.S.-Russia prisoner swap possible?

“July 1, 2020, will go down in the history of the Russian state as the beginning of its end. The day the Kremlin chimes will stop. On that day, we will finally give up playing modern democracy and acknowledge that the country will follow the path of Central Asian-style satrapies,” he wrote in a column in the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta.

“Elections in Russia will stop influencing anything and will become a ritual of obedience to the supreme authority,” he wrote. “The new constitution is harmful for Russia, but it does not matter. It is adopted in the interests of one and only person and with one goal: so that this person never parts with power.”

The push to rally the vote seems to be an all-state effort.

In the state-owned companies that dominate much of the economy, bosses are ordering their staff to register to vote and prove they did so.

Elena, 49, a social worker, said her supervisor directed her to produce a screenshot to prove she voted in favor of the amendments. She spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the risk of dismissal.

“The boss told me that I should also register my children and this is all for the voting on the constitution,” she said. “I am really mad, but what can I do? I can’t ignore it, because the boss demands that I show her my registration and send her all the details.”

Pressure to vote

The radio station Echo of Moscow cited dozens of complaints by St. Petersburg civil servants ordered to vote early. A St. Petersburg deputy, Boris Vishnevsky, filed a complaint to prosecutors.

Teachers in Moscow and employees of several Moscow city departments were ordered to show their bosses that they had registered online and to find other people to do so, Russian media reported.

With symbolic train ride, Putin showcases new link to annexed Crimea

In an interview aired last month, Putin did his part to drum up national pride. He described Russia as “not just a country but a distinct civilization.”

On June 12, Russia Day, he spoke of the country’s “thousand-year history” and “boundless landscapes.”

“The bright and acutely felt sense of Motherland has always helped our people get through misery, withstand and survive ordeals and meet challenges of all sorts,” he said.

Political analyst Nathaniel Reynolds said Putin’s use of more than 200 amendments was a “stunning trick” to mask the real purpose of the constitutional vote — allowing him to remain in office.

“It was a shocking exercise in political deception, even to the many regime insiders left in the dark,” Reynolds, an analyst at the State Department, wrote in a paper for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he is a nonresident scholar. “A younger Putin recognized the dangers of such a precedent. He told a journalist in 2005 that if leaders change the constitution for their own purposes, there will be nothing left of the state.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-uses-prizes-and-patriotism-to-urge-vote-on-changing-constitution-but-scant-mention-of-keeping-putin-in-power/2020/06/20/e79ea850-afcb-11ea-98b5-279a6479a1e4_story.html