

## Speech at State Duma plenary session • President of Russia



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At a plenary session of the State Duma on amendments to the Russian Federation Constitution.

**State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin:** Colleagues,

Let us get down to work. Mr President, the LDPR faction is the most active here. Colleagues, please register. Please turn on the registration mode. Please note that registration is on. Please show us the results of the registration. There are 428 deputies present and 22 are absent. We have a quorum.

I give the floor to President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin.

**President of Russia Vladimir Putin:** Mr Volodin, State Duma deputies,

Mr Speaker informed me about the discussion that took place here during the second reading of amendments to the Constitution.

Considering the fact that the discussion was of a fundamental nature and that it was my initiative, as you know, to have a broad discussion on the possible amendments to the main law of Russia, I found it necessary to speak out here, at the State Duma, without delay on the most important proposals voiced here today, and I informed the Speaker about this.

Colleagues, but I would like to begin by thanking the members of the working group, State Duma deputies and Federation Council members, who participated directly and very intensely in developing amendments to the Constitution.

Let me repeat, these amendments are long overdue; they are necessary and, I believe, will be useful for Russia, for society and for our people, because they are aimed at strengthening our sovereignty, our traditions and our values – the foundation of our life; at expanding and specifying social guarantees, which means fully developing the social character of our country, and, in general, creating conditions for the confident, progressive and evolutionary development of Russia in the long historical term.

I agree with the previous speakers: the world is indeed changing. And not just because of the rapid, explosive in fact, development of technology, but literally of all spheres of life. These changes are cardinal and, I would say, irreversible. We can see how difficult the situation in the global policy, security and the global economy is. We are also battling the coronavirus now, oil prices are fluctuating, together with the national currency exchange rate and stock exchanges.

However, I would like to use this floor to say I have absolute confidence that we will get over this, and do so with dignity. The economy will grow stronger, and the most important industries will become more prominent and competitive. But we must work, and work together, consolidating our efforts.

However, all this is creating additional risks for us or, as they say, challenges. At the same time, there are those who want to deter Russia and are ready to use any method for this, which we know and have pointed out more than once.

In fact, the policy of deterrence has been used for a long time now, as we well know, and those who are pursuing it have said so openly and without being embarrassed. They are waiting for us to make a mistake or to slip up, losing our bearings or, worse still, getting bogged down in internal dissent, which is sometimes fanned, fuelled and even financed from abroad. It is even possible to calculate exactly how much money is allocated for this. This is something you can calculate.

I know that Russia's leading political forces have largely similar views on these matters. This was clearly indicated once again during my recent meeting with the leaders of the State Duma factions at the Kremlin, which began on March 5 and ended on March 6, as Mr Zyuganov pointed out after taking a look at his watch.

At the same time, it is obvious to everyone that, unfortunately, many things in the country have only been tacked together hastily, as people say, and that we remain vulnerable in many respects. I am referring to political stability, ethnic and religious accord, as well as economic and social development. This is why our work on the amendments has provoked a question, which is being discussed increasingly more actively, about the further forming of the supreme institute of state power in Russia, or more precisely, presidential power.

The President is the guarantor of the Constitution or, simply put, the guarantor of the country's security, domestic stability and, as I said before, evolutionary development – I repeat, evolutionary development, because we have had enough revolutions. Russia has fulfilled its plan when it comes to revolutions.

By the way, I saw during my trips across the country that these questions worry our people no less than they do you, State Duma deputies. Their concern is understandable. I have no doubt that the day will come when the supreme, presidential power in Russia will not be so personified, if I may say so, that it will not be connected to a certain individual. But this is exactly how it was in our previous history, and we must take this into account.

I am fully aware of my responsibility to the people, and I see that the people, or at least the majority of our society are waiting for my personal assessments and decisions on key matters of the development of the Russian state, both now and after 2024.

Therefore, I will formulate my position in an abundantly clear, honest and straightforward manner, including my opinion on the specific proposals that have been made here and were generally raised during the discussion on amendments to the Constitution.

As regards the position of Alexander Karelin on the need for new early elections to the State Duma:

My point of view on this issue is known. If the citizens of Russia vote for the amendments to the Fundamental Law, including the transfer of some presidential powers to the State Duma and the Federation Council, such changes should enter into force immediately after the publication of the adopted amendments and, hence, the State Duma would receive its expanded powers there and then.

This raises the question, do the current members of the State Duma have the right to accept these new powers? I think the answer is certainly positive. Why? There are all the legitimate legal grounds for this. Of course, in the final count this is your decision. But if there is no consensus on this issue in parliament, and the Speaker told me there is none, I do not see the need for early elections to the State Duma.

Let me say again that if people go to the polls on April 22 and vote, they will reaffirm the new authority of the State Duma. The people, the only source of power, will have their say. So that is settled.

Let me repeat, this deals with substantial expansion of the parliament's authority, and this is the road to closer work between the representative and executive branches of power. This, colleagues, is how I planned it. This will enhance their reciprocal responsibility for the results of their work or failure.

I believe such changes are justified and sufficient at the current stage of our social development. In effect, this is a major step forward in developing our democracy.

I would like to return to the issue that I mentioned at the beginning. We have indeed reached the line and before we cross this line we must, according to many participants of this discussion, make a decision on a fundamental and sensitive issue concerning the highest level of state authority, which is presidential power. I think and I strongly believe that a strong presidential vertical for our country, for Russia is absolutely necessary. And today's economic situation, as I have just pointed out, and the situation in other spheres such as security is another reminder.

First of all, it is necessary for stability. Of course, there are other options, which we are well aware of, such as parliamentary government, which is widely common in the world. However, at the current stage of our development it is not suitable for us. Look at what is happening in the European countries with a traditional parliamentary democracy. Some of these countries cannot even form their governments for years, without any exaggeration. For Russia, this is absolutely impossible and completely unacceptable.

Now, for example, granting other bodies of power such as the Security Council or the State Council – which are all the more so not directly elected by the people – with certain serious powers of a presidential nature would be, in my opinion, wrong and unacceptable, even dangerous.

Firstly, it has nothing to do with democracy. Secondly, it will inevitably result in the division of society. I am certain that Mr Zhirinovskiy, who came forward with this proposal as far as I am aware, having a lot of experience as a politician will agree with me. In Russia, it will inevitably result in the duality of power, a public divide, and will affect the fate of the country and the people in the most negative and perhaps tragic way. So let us not take this road.

There have been proposals and ideas to amend the Constitution to extend the term of the current President, your humble servant, to do so on condition people vote (if they do) for this amendment.

Yes, the national vote is to take place in April. But in this case, the authority of the President would be extended as a result of a clear-choice election. I think this is also wrong and should not be done. Russian citizens must have an alternative at any election, including the presidential election. All elections must be open and competitive.

Generally speaking, the proposals made by Valentina Tereshkova (we have deep respect for her, and I would like to congratulate you, Ms Tereshkova, on your recent birthday once again) are also understandable. The first is to remove from the Constitution the number of terms for which the country's top official may be elected. A similar idea was voiced at my recent meeting with the public in St Petersburg. This is exactly what one veteran suggested. I said then that I did not wish to return to Soviet times. I will be straight, this remark was inappropriate because there were no elections in Soviet times. Everything was done behind the scenes, or as a result of some inter-party procedures or intrigues. There were no real elections then. Now the situation is very different. This is true. It is necessary to go and vote. This is a different situation.

Strictly speaking, it would technically be possible to cancel the restriction on the number of terms, all the more so since it does not exist in many other countries, including our neighbours. They have no restrictions on the number of presidential terms. Incidentally, the amendment to the Constitution that limits the number to two presidential terms only appeared overseas, in the United States, in 1947. It was only in 1951 that it was voted for and ratified by all states. 1951 is not that far off, just yesterday in terms of history, I will explain why.

Incidentally, there are precedents for elections for more than two terms, including in the United States. And why? Look: the Great Depression, huge economic problems, unemployment and poverty in the US at that time, and later on, World War II. When a country is going through such upheavals and such difficulties (in our case we have not yet overcome all the problems since the USSR, this is also clear), stability may be more important and must be given priority. All the more so, let me repeat, when a country still has many problems.

But when the political, economic and social spheres gain internal stability and maturity, when the country becomes, undoubtedly more powerful and less vulnerable from the outside, then the possible alteration of power, of course, becomes more important. This is necessary for the development of the country. We do not adopt amendments for a year, or two years or even ten years, I hope; but for a longer historical term, at least 30–50 years. For this long term, society must have guarantees for the regular change of power. We should think about the generations to come. This is why I do not believe it is viable to delete the restriction on the number of presidential terms from the Constitution.

In fact, the second proposal means lifting restrictions against any person, any citizen, including the current president, from taking part in an election in the future. In the course of transparent and competitive elections, naturally. And, naturally, only if Russian citizens support this proposal, this amendment, and say “yes” during the general vote on April 22.

In fact, this amendment will only be possible under one condition: if the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation provides an official ruling that this amendment does not contradict the principles and the main provisions

of the Constitution.

Let us not forget, we are not adopting a new Constitution but only important amendments, which are still separate amendments. Let me stress once again that I do not believe it viable to change the Constitution in general, because it still has a lot of potential – on the contrary, it has proven its effectiveness – even to solve the issue of presidential power. This is why I am repeating this: if the Federal Assembly adopts the law on amendments to the Constitution as it is now, it must be sent to the Russian Federation Constitutional Court for an assessment and an official ruling.

And, to conclude my speech, I would like to once again thank the State Duma deputies and the Federation Council members for their active and substantive work on the amendments to the Constitution. I would like to sincerely thank the Russian people for their support. I have felt it over the years. It would have been difficult and even impossible to do anything without this support, especially during the most difficult time at the beginning of the 2000s.

I know that we have not managed to do everything we planned. I understand the criticism I hear, including that related to a number of difficult decisions. But I would like to assure you that I have and always will go by the current and long-term interests of Russia in my work. And exceptionally by the will of our people. By the way, this is why I have proposed holding a general vote for our people to decide on these amendments to the Constitution.

And, to our people, I would like to say: it will be as you vote on April 22, my friends. You and I, against all odds, have done a lot to make our country stronger. I am sure that together we will do many more good things, at least before 2024. Then we will see.

Thank you.