

Russian Duma approves new prime minister

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On Thursday, January 16, the Russian Duma (parliament) unanimously confirmed President Vladimir Putin's nominee for prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin. Mishustin was nominated by Putin a day earlier, hours after the entire Russian government resigned following the president's state of the nation address. In his annual address, Putin announced he is seeking changes to the country's constitution.

In Thursday's vote, 383 deputies voted for Mishustin and 41 abstained. No one voted against the candidate. In contrast, during the balloting for former Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev in 2018 there were 56 no votes. The same was true for Vladimir Putin in 2008. Mishustin is set to announce a new cabinet by Tuesday.

In an interview with Russian state television, Medvedev stated that he and his government had resigned because "such enormous tasks were outlined for the renewal of the political system" that the "president, in order to undertake all of these decisions, has to be entirely free in order to discuss and undertake them, without [being disturbed by] any other factors."

In his address to the Duma, Mishustin emphasized that his government's primary goal would be to realize the "program of social justice" that had been laid down by Putin in his state of the nation address last Wednesday. Under conditions of staggering social inequality, Putin made a number of social promises, including the introduction of free hot meals for elementary school children and an increase in the number of kindergarten spots. These measures are window-dressing for what will be an intensified assault on the living standards of the working class.

Putin and sections of the Russian oligarchy regard Mishustin as better equipped than former Prime Minister Medvedev to carry out massive attacks on the working class. He is also seen as a figure who can facilitate a closing of ranks in the ruling class. Medvedev was often described as a weakling and a

"lame duck" in the Russian and international press.

The business daily *Vedomosti*, the Russian equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal*, praised Mishustin as an efficient manager who stands above different "political and business groupings" and "works well" with the so-called *siloviki*, a term which encompasses the police, secret services, the military and paramilitary structures of the Interior Ministry. Other outlets and leading politicians have issued similar praise for Mishustin, whose name, up until Wednesday, was virtually unknown in the general population.

Alexei Kudrin, one of Putin's closest and most long-standing allies, fully endorsed Mishustin, stating that he "understands better [than Medvedev] the situation in business circles, he can balance the interests of business and the state." Kudrin and his think tank, the Center for Strategic Studies, effectively authored the widely hated pension reform of 2018, which raised the retirement age for men and women by five years in 2019, robbing millions virtually overnight of substantial portions of their pensions.

Kudrin and Mishustin have worked together since at least 1998. From 2008 to 2010 Mishustin was the president of the investment company UFG Asset Management. From 2010 to 2017, he headed the Federal Tax Service, leading efforts to centralize and digitize the taxation system and cutting the number of annual tax audits of business by the agency by seven times: from 75,500 in 2011 to 10,900 in 2018.

Immediately after his confirmation as prime minister, Mishustin declared that he would not roll back the pension reform or consider lowering the income tax for poor people. Real incomes for the vast majority of Russians, above all those with low earnings, have declined for five years in a row. The government has simultaneously enacted dramatic cuts in healthcare and education. The price for food items has increased, on average, 50-80 percent between 2015 and 2019. One in

eight Russians now officially live in “extreme poverty,” that is on less than \$150 a month. Meanwhile, Russia’s oligarchs increased their personal wealth by 21 percent in 2019 alone.

With the Mishustin government and the constitutional changes proposed by Putin, the oligarchy is responding above all to the international resurgence of the class struggle as well as the escalation of the imperialist war drive. They represent an escalation of authoritarian rule and an attempt to create the basis for a closing of ranks by the oligarchy against the working class.

While the concrete significance of several of the constitutional changes that Putin proposed remain unclear, some of the proposals are aimed at better suppressing and mediating growing divisions within the ruling class, especially between Moscow and the regional elites.

Putin demanded that regional prosecutors be appointed by the Federal Council, and not, as is currently the case, through consultation with regional parliaments. “We cannot have some kind of home-bred legality in this or that region,” Putin stressed.

At the same time, he called for a strengthening of the role of the State Council, which he currently heads, and of regional governors within the Council. The State Council was created in 2000 in an effort to bring the regional governors under much tighter control from Moscow. In his speech to the parliament, Mishustin repeated several times that his government would put a strong emphasis on close collaboration with the regions.

Since the dissolution of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism, there have been significant separatist and regionalist tendencies within the ruling class and sections of the upper middle class. The Russian Federation encompasses 85 regions. While the richest oil producing regions and Moscow have a GDP that is close or even higher than that of the US, the GDP of many others is on the level of countries like Honduras.

Regionalist tendencies were pronounced in the 1990s as aspiring oligarchs and regional elites vied for the control over the resources of the former Soviet Union. In 1997, about half of the 44,000 laws passed by regional authorities did not conform to federal law. The curtailment of the power of regional elites and authorities and their subordination to Moscow was a

priority for Putin since the start of his first presidency in 2000. In recent years, tensions between Moscow and regional elites have increased again. Putin has fired and replaced dozens of regional governors within the past three years. With the full support of Washington, the liberal opposition has been deliberately encouraging regionalist and separatist sentiments among local elites and sections of the upper middle class.

Other constitutional changes proposed by Putin in his recent address aim to further whip up Russian nationalism. They represent a direct attack on the democratic rights of the working class. The Kremlin wishes to ban dual citizenship for all those holding or running for office on a regional or a federal level. In addition, it seeks to raise the minimum residency requirement for presidential candidates from 10 to 25 years. Such laws can and will not only be used against members of the right-wing liberal opposition, but any opponent of the government.

Emboldened by these proposals, the far-right Orthodox group Sorok Sorokov launched a barely veiled anti-Semitic campaign against Ivan Urgant, a popular talk show host who holds Russian and Israeli citizenship, last Wednesday. The group demands that Urgant be deprived of his Russian citizenship for allegedly “offending Christian values” because of jokes about Jesus Christ in a show from January 7. They advocate a general ban on dual citizenship.



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