

Kremlin appoints new cabinet

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28 January 2020

With the unanimous support of the 432 deputies serving in Russia's parliament, President Vladimir Putin installed a new cabinet last week to serve under recently appointed Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. In another possible shakeup, there were press reports over the weekend that Vladislav Surkov, the leading architect of the Kremlin's Ukraine policy, has resigned and will be replaced by a figure known to support brokering a deal with Kiev. The changes to the composition of the government come as the Kremlin presses ahead with constitutional reforms, which were unanimously approved by the Duma several days ago after a brief reading.

In the cabinet reshuffle, the individuals occupying the very top positions remained the same, with Sergei Lavrov, Sergei Shoigu, Anton Siluanov, and Alexander Novak returning as the ministers of foreign affairs, defense, finance, and energy, respectively. Turnover was concentrated in the domestic portfolios, with the heads of culture, education, health, economic development, sports, justice, and emergency situations all being replaced. Press commentaries, which are highly divided over the implications of these changes, generally describe the new ministers as young, career technocrats. The new cabinet appears to be aimed at reaffirming Moscow's overall geopolitical and macro-economic policies, while attempting to address popular discontent over the country's domestic situation by removing figures associated with unpopular social measures.

The replacement of the government of former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev comes as Russia faces a combination of foreign and internal crises. Internationally, Moscow is under relentless pressure from the United States, where anti-Russian politics is a central feature of American foreign policy and the driving force of efforts to remove President Donald Trump from office. The recent American assassination

of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, one of the top military leaders of a country with whom Russia is allied in the war in Syria, underscored the fraught character of US-Russian relations and Moscow's vulnerability on the world stage.

Domestically, the Kremlin confronts a population discontented with falling household incomes, rising consumer prices, poverty wages, attacks on pensions, and the cutting of funding for health, education, and other basic services. Despite the government's ability to maintain its fiscal position in the face of US sanctions, Russia's economy is stagnating, with growth rates hovering around just one to two percent since 2017. Another half million people entered the ranks of the officially poor as of mid-2019, in comparison to a year prior. Protests over social conditions have erupted regularly over the last several years. At the same time, a pro-Western liberal opposition, concentrated in Moscow and other major cities, continues its calls for the end of the Putin government.

The constitutional changes simultaneously being pursued by the Kremlin have provoked widespread criticism from this opposition and been denounced broadly in the Western press as a "power grab" by Putin, who is slated to leave office in 2024. Despite these vocal criticisms, there is little clarity as to the underlying aims and likely impact of the proposed reforms, with commentators unable to say definitively how the functioning of the Russian government will be affected or how Putin would use the changes to secure his position upon giving up the presidency.

The reforms include the institution of a two-term limit on the presidency, regardless of whether those terms are consecutive, an increased role for the Duma in the process of appointing the prime minister and cabinet, an elevation in the amount of influence held by the Security Council in the presidential administration, further federal control over regional government

affairs, restrictions on citizenship and residency requirements for officeholders, the assertion of the primacy of Russian over international law, the regular indexing of pensions to inflation, and the establishment of a minimum wage that is not lower than the official poverty line.

The constitutional reforms, which the Kremlin is seeking to quickly implement, will be put to a popular vote in mid-April. This vote, however, appears to be largely consultative, as there is no legal requirement for the holding of a binding referendum on changes to the constitution. The pension and minimum wage measures included in the reform package appeared geared at securing a sizable turnout for the mid-April ballot. They are, however, face-saving moves that will have little real impact on living conditions in the country. The opposition is calling for a “no” vote against what it describes as a “constitutional coup.”



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