

NWX-WOODROW WILSON CENTER

Moderator: Maria Stella Gatzoulis
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Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in listen-only mode until the question-and-answer session of the call. To ask a question during that time please press star followed by number one. Today's conference is being recorded. Any objections you may disconnect at this time. Now I'd like to turn the meeting over to Matthew Rojansky, Director of the Kennan Institute at the Wilson Center

Matthew Rojansky: Hi. Thank you very much to everyone for joining us. This is obviously a moment of interesting developments in Russia. It is our job to observe those developments but mostly to analyze them and try to put them in context. So that's exactly what we're going to do this morning. The developments I'm talking about of course began as far as we're aware with President Putin's announcement about constitutional changes which was mooted in fact in December and then announced in fuller form last week on January 15 -- which then triggered the resignation of the government. That is to say the prime minister Dmitry Medvedev and the cabinet ministers and the appointment since then of a new prime minister and gradual trickling information about potential new government officials as well as the submission of the formal proposed constitutional amendments to the legislature. So that's the state of play as we have it.

Now we have three really deep experienced analysts to talk to you about what all this means and where it may be headed. And what I'm going to do is just introduce them as I hand them the floor. They'll each talk for about five minutes and then we'll have plenty of time for questions and answers. And I believe you press star 1 on your phone to be added to the question queue. So feel free to do that at any time. We won't lose track of you.

We're going to begin with Sergey Parkhomenko Senior Advisor here at the Kennan Institute. Very well-known Russian journalist and publisher, founder of a number of projects aimed at civic activism and promotion of liberal values in Russia. In particular he was the first editor in chief and founder of Etouffee -- Russia's first Current Affairs Weekly -- which was published in cooperation with Newsweek. Has also served as editor in chief of several publishing houses and worked in translation and was editor in chief of (Crookes) Russia's oldest monthly magazine. He has -- probably best known to all of you since 2003 -- been a very well-known voice on Echo of Moscow radio presenting the weekly program Subway (unintelligible). So without further delay, Sergey.

Sergey Parkhomenko: Thank you, Matt. The first impressions of Putin's declaration for Russian parliament was Wednesday - was that Lebanon (unintelligible), decided something important. And the first impression was he, well abandoned the function of Russian president even before 2004 to be - to self-replace to another (post). Maybe created to (bolster) President of State. And second impression was he almost destroyed the presidential power because some part of presidential confidences goes to prime minister or to parliament. But it was just a first impression because now we see the constitutional amendment proposed by Putin. And we see clearly that it's absolutely another situation.

The presidential power is more reinforced (and larger). And after this

presidential announcements - after this Putin announcement Russian regime will be - they have - will become much more presidential regime much more authoritarian regime with much important concentration of different power on the hand of president. In other scenarios like this scenario of creation of some Russian (unintelligible) union or something like this, to create also a new possibility to Putin to conserve his supreme power and being president of some new created (interrist) state (council) or something like this. This scenario is not abandoned. It's quite possible even after this constitutional amendment and received that after this Putin will control - absolute will control...

((FOREIGN LANGUAGE 5:48-5:51))

Sergey Parkhomenko: I'm sorry. After they -- Putin -- will control the nomination of all the government and his power to nominate fourth ministers like Minister of Defense, Director of (SSB). the Minister for Foreign Affairs and so on, will be fixed on the level of constitution.

Another very important thing is that the new right of president to dismiss member of Supreme Court and constitutional court. The role of the constitutional court. He will be totally controlled by President. Well it's a very important system because the role of this is to explain why Russia with a new constitution - with an amended constitution is a quite new Russia. Youth Day, where all that history is starting from scratch and all account of president's elections is counted from scratch. I think most - probably most important scenario now (unintelligible) scenario now is Putin will stay the president for two more or much more -- I don't know -- new period. And it will be - he will just conserve this system of his personal rule in Russia.

Matthew Rojansky: Okay. Thanks very much, Sergey. We'll go to Max now. Max is also a

Senior Advisor at the Kennedy Institute. He's editor in chief of Kennan's Russia File Blog and is also editor at large of (Unintelligible) which is an independent Russian daily newspaper. He's been a contributing opinion writer for the International New York Times since 2013. In addition to his weekly publication on The Russia File he writes a column in Russian on societal and institutional change in the former Soviet region. So, Max, the floor is yours.

Max : Hi Matt and hello everyone. Thanks for having me. Well to be honest I think it's - everyone who's pronouncing anything at this moment I think should take pause simply because this whole story does look like a special operation -- which is, you know, the way the Kremlin has been operating under Putin for the entire 20 years. We've witnessed situations similar situations where suddenly out of the blue, President Putin appears and changes the laws, changes the rules. In a moment where no one expected. Like, I don't know. Like after the Baslen tragedy, the terrorist attack in Beslan, in Digos city where hundreds of people including children died in a terrorist attack. Putin in a few days announced sweeping legislative change that included, for example, the banned elections for governors in all of Russia's regions.

So something similar is happening now. Out of the blue, the political leadership of the Kremlin decides to change the constitution and change the rules. And a lot of the discussion right now in Russia -- what I see, what I hear from friends and experts and (pundits) -- is basically why the rush? Why what's happened? And apparently it might be something that's out of the public eye. Something happened inside the system. Some kind of threat that Putin thought was coming his way and he decided to anticipate something that's been happening from below or from his threat from his colleagues, whatever it was, because it does look like a special operation. Originally Putin announced in his State of the Nation Address just a few days ago, he said that he will convene the constitutional assembly. There will be all kinds of

deliberations and then later this year we will see probably some amendments coming.

But then three days later we have the amendments, so they'll submit it to the Duma and we basically now can read and discuss the amendments. And despite the fact that they are already submitted and we can check out the news, it's still unclear what role Putin is - sees himself playing. Well myself I would say originally I was thinking along the lines of the (Nazarbaev Kazakhstan) president who last year stepped down from presidency and (Romain) stayed on as Security Council Chair in his country. Sort of following in the steps of Seng Xiaoping of China or Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. You know, the statesman who would stay on and continue to oversee the political system and see their, you know, continued too but with other politicians playing the main roles.

I thought Putin was doing something like that. I think apparently I was mistaken. And indeed, Sergey is right. And it does look like - or let's say it does - it probably is more likely that Putin intends to remain officially in power in the - in some kind of senior or let's say top actually, the top position for indefinite period of time. So but the thing is - I think what's important or just to is to try and describe, you know, the predicament of somebody who is Russian - like myself I'm Russian. I've been trying to cover - covering Russia and Russia's politics for a long -- long time. The predicament is that basically you are in the dark. And you know that all kinds of changes still could be introduced again because there's only one source of legislation in Russia. It's this collective government. There is the administration the presidential administration. There is the government - ministries of the government.

But essentially those with administration being the chief and the most important center of legislative - the legislative activity. There's no parliament.

There's no deliberation. There's no discussion. There is a top down process. Essentially what we see is a top down rewrite of the rules that no one is allowed to participate in. And we are all left with what we are actually doing now -- trying to figure it out post factum. And Sergey's analysis is very good. And I do think that he's right in the sense that originally we thought that it would be - going to be the presidency would be diluted. It does seem that the presidency is not going to be diluted. Or on the contrary, the institution of the presidency will be even more. It gets even stronger and more powerful after those - all those amendments despite the new powers that some of the branches of government are getting.

So but what we see is still this top down process of essentially an authoritarian legislative activity with a top down rewrite of the rules. So we are left guessing which is kind of sad and you remain on the sidelines. So that's all for now. I'd be ready to elaborate.

Matthew Rojanksy: Thank you Max. All right, we'll go now to Will Pomeranz. I just want to remind callers if you'd like to ask a question, just go ahead and hit star 1 any time to be added to the question queue and we'll see it pop up on some type of magical screen here. Will Pomeranz is not only Deputy Director here at the Kennan Institute but he is one of the foremost Western observers of Russian law. Has in fact recently published a book Law in the Russian State Russia's Legal Evolution from Peter the Great to the Amir Putin. And so who better to talk to us about what in fact the state has in mind with these proposed constitutional amendments and what that order may translate to. (Then) Will Pomeranz, please.

Will Pomeranz: Thank you very much Matt. I'm going to follow on from Sergey and to Max and emphasize I think that, as Sergey said, this is not a retreat from a strong presidency but in fact that the presidency has been reinforced. And indeed

when you look at his -- Putin's -- address to the nation, that the nation address he emphasized the important role of unity yet again. And unity is a code word for top down legality and for the power vertical. And I think if you look at Putin's proposed amendments they are all enforcing and reinforcing the power vertical.

I'll just briefly kind of go over some of these points and then we can illuminate them in more detail in question time. Obviously there is the strong presidency that he said in the speech that he wanted to maintain and whose powers are in fact enhanced under these amendments most notably by being able to initiate the removal of judges, both constitute constitutional court judges, Supreme Court judges, taxation judges and appellate judges. This is a huge increase in presidential authority. There is this question about a stronger legislature and the ability to propose the government. But I think we are a long way from what the French call cohabitation between different parties and the presidency and the parliament because I don't believe that even with these reforms that you're about to see independent elections for the Duma.

Max and Sergey talked about the question of the state council. The constitutional amendments really punt on the state council because they say it's going to be primarily defined by law. So we are kind of in the dark about what the council will do. But it does say that it's going to help define the basic direction of internal and foreign policy. And that would be a major power because up until now it's the presidency who has had the monopoly on defining foreign policy. This notion of unity and the power vertical is reinforced in other parts of these draft legislation as well. There is something called the unified system of public power now. What that means in practice, we don't know. But the most likely scenario is that it's going to limit local self-government which is already starved our resources anyway.

The power of the property is enhanced. It finally receives what it did not receive in the 1993 constitution and that is a constitutional recognition of its powers of supervision of being able to supervise the constitutional system. And this power was granted to the property largely by legislation. But Putin now has put the property right back into the constitution and put it essentially almost an equal with the judiciary because it is going to be responsible for supervising the Russian constitution.

Finally I'll just emphasize if there's potential loser in all these amendments that is the judiciary. The size of the constitutional court is going to be shrunk from 19 to 11 members. And I think while we can only speculate as to why, I think the most likely reason is that a smaller court is easier to control the 19 judges with some judges usually writing their dissents. I've already mentioned about the right to remove judges. And finally there is the unique part amendment which essentially turns the constitutional court into an administrative organ. If the president vetoes a bill and if the legislature overrides the veto, then instead of the law taking effect the president has a right to ask the constitutional court whether the law is constitutional before any case has been presented to the court.

And so I think this is yet again putting the constitutional court in an awkward position because it's very unlikely -- as long as Putin is in charge -- that it would find agree with the legislature and somehow not be in a position to have to find the law unconstitutional. We've just begun the process of the amendment. Again, Putin said there was going to be time to draft the amendment and they appeared very quickly. The Duma and the legislature will review them. They will go through a first, second, and third reading. But I think that the large outline has already been defined by the presidency's office. With that, I'll stop.

Matthew Rojansky: Thanks very much, Will. Again if you want to ask a question hit star 1 on your phone to be added to the queue. Let me begin the discussion with maybe kind of a bubble bursting observation. Maybe I'm wrong but, my intuition in all of this is we are being easily sucked in by terminology. The fact that we're speaking about constitution, the fact that we're speaking about amendments to laws, the fact that we're speaking about courts and judges -- it all gives a kind of veneer of modernity albeit authoritarian modernity to this discussion. When in fact it seems to me in at least three very important respects. You have already noted the ways in which what we are observing is something that would have taken place at any point over the last 100 years of Russian and Soviet history.

Let me explain what I mean. Number one, that this was a surprise. Soviet leaders, the more authoritarian they were the more likely they were to seek to surprise the other elements in the system as well as any anti systemic elements. It's a better way to preserve power to act on the basis of surprise. It's almost a military tactic, if you will. And Vladimir Putin has practiced this consistently for 20 years. Here he's done it again.

Number two, Sergey I think mentioned this. The idea that there may have been some subterranean, some unseen rivalries within the system. That this was -- in a sense a response to that -- this may have been as much triggered by the big arc of the Putin regime that we know about which is 2024 and so on. But it may have been just as much triggered by some type of rivalries within the system that we didn't know about. Again, that's an absolutely common almost ubiquitous theme in 100 years of Soviet and post-Soviet history.

And then third, and this is the one I think we touched on the least -- and I'd like to make my question -- the idea that the government resigned to make room for a constitutional reform process is of course patently, untrue. It's clear

that the resignation of the government was more than anything about moving Dmitry Medvedev out of the position of prime minister and moving some other people around that we'll probably learn about soon. My question is whether this was fundamentally about Medvedev's performance in particular with respect to what he was supposed to do for Mr. Putin -- which was implement the national projects. Or if you will, a six year plan, right, reminiscent of a five year plan. And he underperformed the plan as the accounts chamber of Mr. Kudrin has told us over and over and over that the plan is being underspent. It's being underperformed. To what extent was this about performance and to what extent was this about something different that Medvedev wasn't providing that Putin needed in that role? Who would like to take that question?

Max : Well I'll try.

William Pomeranz: Sorry go ahead Max.

Max: Yes, just quickly. Basically I think there are two things. I do agree Matt that Medvedev government from some point of view did underperform despite that they really couldn't, I think, perform any better because the political challenges created by the Kremlin prevented the technocrats from really doing their jobs. I mean, really achieving things the way they could because the actual detection side of the Russian government is fairly good. We have a functioning finance ministry, really well governed central bank et cetera But because of the aggressive foreign policy there were very harsh limits on what the government could achieve. So I would sort of cautiously moderately defend Medvedev in that sense. But on the other hand also I think of course he was a weak prime minister. The other thing - so this is one thing. So Putin does need economic growth and he will be trying to get it all started.

The other thing, I think, is Medvedev has been seen for all those years essentially as a cover for so-called systemic liberals. The government ministers or other officials will all considered sort of on the - on a bit on the liberal side of the spectrum. And for Putin and those who are close to him, those are - always are those people are always compromised because the strategic direction of Russia under Putin is becoming more and more sovereign. What they call sovereign essentially being independent from the rest of the world especially from the West, especially from the US, as possible. And lots of things are seen by the Kremlin as being influenced by the West at large. Despite the things that's been happening recently, despite the fact that President Trump is not the kind of U.S. we knew before.

So basically, there are still - I think I would say that are both things. There's two directions that Medvedev has been seen by Putin and company as someone who's forever compromised as being essentially a kind of latently pro-prop, pro-Western politician who would try and build the kind of Western inspired institutions in Russia. And Russia needs its own sovereign institutions even in the Internet.

Matthew Rojansky: Thank you Max. I want to get right to the questions in the queue but I'll quickly give both Will and Sergey a chance to weigh in on Medvedev and the national project and so on

Will Pomeranz: So I think the question of Medvedev's performance is less relevant. I think Medvedev existed to be fired. At some point, someone has to be blamed and he has been.

Sergey Parkhomeriko: That's true.

Will Pomeranz: And he has been remarkably loyal and after being put in very uncomfortable

positions. So I think Putin - that Medvedev has only existed at some point to be fired and then did move in a different direction and to have to take the blame. I think what's interesting in terms of the national project via be it the economy et cetera Putin has emphasized in fact he wants to reinforce social rights. That's part of the constitutional amendments, that was part of his State of the Nation address. And instead of putting money into national projects I think Putin might just be emphasizing social spending instead. Go ahead.

Sergey Parkhomenko: Definitely. Well I think the person you see is always not so important in the game. And this situation when we have lots of very important constitutional amendments and the change of government, all the (unintelligible) - all the Russian government. It's a part of the game just to avoid the real discussion and real attention to the public. To the matter -- very important that Russian constitution and change - this is a huge change of Russian constitutional state. I think if you (unintelligible) one time in your life the game of three (shell), all is tough. And second, top much different movements, too much different war, different - just different - if the gamer has four hands all at the same time. The situation of Russia now.

Matthew Rojansky: All right, thank you both. I'm going to go right to our calls. Since our first question is going to come from Jill Dougherty, this is a perfect opportunity for me to advertise the second episode of the Kennan-X podcast series -- which is hosted by Jill Dougherty. And will be entitled Nuclear Insecurity Should Not Start Die, including interviews with former U.S. ambassador to Russia John Byerly and former NATO deputy secretary general Rose Gottemoeller. So, Jill, with that little advertisement for your work your question please.

Jill Dougherty: Matt, thank you very much. I appreciate that. And I hope people really can listen. This is a very helpful session and I appreciate everybody who's participating and talking about this. I had a question, you know, when we

started we were - you were talking about presidential power. But there is this theory that now that we don't exactly know what will happen to the state council (unintelligible), you said it. But one of the theories, of course, is that it could be beefed up and strengthened. And it already has been pointed out -- I think by will that it Will -- it will deal with foreign policy and domestic policy. Is it correct to think that President Putin would want to become the head of that? He will be head of that but he could beef it up. And that would be his power which would not be as a president but as a, you know, power behind the throne or beyond this (unintelligible). Thank you.

Matthew Rojansky: Great. Great question Jill. And it's a chance to clarify exactly what the speakers meant by saying that rather than weakening the presidency these reforms strengthen the presidency because if Putin were to just content himself to the Deng Ziaoping state council chairmanship and leave the presidency to someone else then all these formal powers -- will, you mentioned the ability to fire all the judges -- these do reside with the president and not with the terror of the state council as far as we know

Will Pomeranz: Yes. Yes it would be. And the question is if Putin - depending on how events unfold over the next four years, depending on what is actually in the law about the state council, will Putin be able to control the system and not be president? I guess that's the crucial issue. And the answer is we don't know. It all depends on the transition. It depends on who he puts in as president. One would have thought that Medvedev would have been a fine second term president if only because he's so loyal to Putin and would allow Putin to control the presidency via the state council.

Matthew Rojansky: But let's just clarify one thing. No one is saying here that Putin will remain as president. He hasn't demanded the constitution to allow that

William Pomeranz: He has amended the constitution so that the president can serve only two terms. I agree with Sergey. Just because he's amended the Constitution in 2020 doesn't mean he doesn't amend the constitution in 2023 and says well then maybe I should stay president. Interestingly, he has decided that in order to engage the people in approving these constitutional amendments, he's not going to hold a formal referendum -- which is by law a high special (DePass). So he's just going to have a national plebiscite. Not to say, that in 2024 as events develop and how Putin feels that he doesn't say okay, we've asked the national public adopted the 1993 constitution then a national plebiscite adopted our major reforms to the constitution. Who is not to say that, let's amend the Constitution one more time and let me stay presidential?

Matthew Rojansky: Okay, Max any burning comments on this or go on to more questions? Let me take another question. Let me take another question now from William Courtney. Bill, go ahead.

William Courtney: Matt, thanks much. Thanks for this great discussion. The new prime minister has a strong background as an investment banker and economic administrator replacing a prime minister who did not have that kind of background. And President Putin outlined the ambitious goals for increasing economic growth rate but yet did not outline any bold reforms for achieving that. What's to make of the sense of this in terms of is economic reform going to be more important as a way of improving economic growth or is the Kremlin still having difficulties coming up with a strategy for that?

Matthew Rojansky: Thanks Bill. So Max why don't we go to you? Again, the question is, you know, what is signaled here with bringing in (Mashustin)? And I'd just throw out one version of this decision that I've heard from Russian coverage is (Mashustin) made the tax process work and he made it transparent. Now he has to do the same for the spending side of the house. Does that sound about

right? What do you think...

Max:

Well yes, roughly although he does seem to have a kind of a complicated biography and his stint as a private - in private business was very -- very short. So basically he is a career bureaucrat who used to work for a long -- long time in various capacities with the Texas ministry and is a deputy then and then for a long time as the head of the Internal Revenue -- the equivalent of IRS in Russia. So basically he seems to be - well from Putin's point apparently, why would you choose a person like this? Apart from astonishing everyone because I don't know a single person who would guess that name that he is a technocrat and that he does not seem to have any political ambition.

But basically very briefly I would say that Putin's idea of how you achieve economic growth is radically different from what is normally meant by policies that would be pro-growth, you know, ant- cyclical, things like that. Putin's economics is different. He has shown for years and years that he does not trust, you know, creating independent institutions, promoting free enterprise, deregulating. He for the past 10 to 15 years, his policies led to creeping renationalization of Russia's economy by various accounts. It's from anything about 40% to 70% depending on how you estimate. Russia's economy is state owned and state governed. So apparently Putin's vision is that you need state investment. You need to oversee this investment very clearly.

So those national projects apparently are given a very important role in this possible future to start Russia's economic growth. But the point is that Medvedev's government contains the remnants, the tiny remnants, of those ideas about the economy that were all about promoting independent institutions free enterprise, you know, defending the property rights et cetera None of that is going to be Putin's priority and the people he's promoting

under the new government.

Matthew Rojansky: Okay, Will you had a quick comment?

Will Pomeranz: Yes, just that Putin used to use his state of the Nation Address to address the question of corruption. There's nothing in the dress that really deals with corruption. And none of these amendments address the fundamental issues of corruption.

Matthew Rojansky: Okay, I want to go now to (Valeria DeGuzman) from Voice of America. Please go ahead. Your question?

(Valeria DeGuzman): Hi. Can you hear me?

Matthew Rojansky: Yes please.

(Valeria DeGuzman): Yes thanks. I just wanted to follow up a little bit on the speed why they are moving so fast? So it was mentioned that there might be some kind of threat or an internal rivalry on (unintelligible). So if you could just expand a little bit on why they're moving so fast that they appreciate. And my second question, I just wanted to touch you a little bit on the nationwide (unintelligible) that's supposed to be in April as I understand. So I don't know. Does it have any meaning? And also how does Russian society sees this kind of constitutional changes? Thank you.

Matthew Rojansky: Okay good.

Max: Well, it was me. I think it was me who said about the speed. So, basically very short answer is that we don't know why it's not public. There should be a reason. I do believe it usually there is the reason why you suddenly annexed

(Crimea) or why you suddenly banned elections all over, you know, the entire country. So and this is something similar. There should be a reason we don't know it.

Matthew Rojansky: Okay. Thanks. Thanks Max. I want to go to Serguey on the question of the speed and also (Valeria) I think you asked about the April referendum and what that's going to mean in my view

Sergey Parkhomenko: In my view the most important thing is the ability to answer why so fast is it's some kind of concentrated personal inside Putin. I think it's important always to Putin that Putin is full of different superstitions and different religious things. And I never exclude that some black models or some (unintelligible) person, speak to him and some things like this. I don't see nothing politically serious in this situation of today except maybe they affect us by Russia law, Duma change can adopt a constitutional amendment one year before the end of his mandate. But in my opinion it's not so serious. Putin destroyed now lots of lot most important things not this small procedural.

What we have in April or more, that's on the end of this spring. A little (unintelligible) this strange popular (unintelligible). It's very important that it's not a real referendum. It's not something to describe it but serious - why are rules. It's very flu procedure and it will be something from the time of Soviet regime. When on the single side want to stay yes or not to - if you want or not the (unintelligible) blanches for Russian children on the school or for the same (unintelligible) we have to say yes or not. If you're pro or con president ruled to dismiss a member of constitutional court. It's absolutely formal thing and it's very easy to manipulate. And I'm sure that lots of Russians will refuse to participate in this (unintelligible).

Matthew Rojansky: Great point, Sergey. I want to go now to (Michael Waller) on the phone.

(Michael Waller): Thank you, Matt. Yes, thank you. My question is this, do any of you see any possibility of public debate or public challenge to any of this inside of Russia? And if so where might that come from? And second and related to that what do you see as changing in Russia's posture via its international relations? How will people - how will other countries react to this? Will they just accept it as just the next chapter in a long history that results that they already expect to see or will this strengthen Russia's hand in any of its international relations? Thank you.

Matthew Rojansky: Great questions (Michael). In particular, so with respect to the public challenge our public debate within Russia and then in particular with respect to the international reaction, I think we know the Western reaction won't exactly be enthusiastic. But I want to go back to this point about Deng Zioping about how important it was that the entire world treated him as the top leader of China even when his formal positions didn't necessarily warrant that. Do you all believe that will continue to be the case with Valdimir Putin?

Will Pomeranz: Well...

Matthew Rojansky: Will, go ahead.

Will Pomeranz: Well I was going to do with the second part of the question.

Matthew Rojansky: Go ahead.

Will Pomeranz: I think in terms of international relations is as I think as Max suggested. I think we'll just be broadly accepted and that the West is not going to have any impact on the internal construction of the Russian constitution. In terms of its relationship to international law. There is a very important question about the

amendments and the Constitution because they have enshrined the notion that the Russian constitution and Russian law is superior if there is a conflict with international law. That is going to put Russia at odds with international principle. But it's unclear exactly how often Russia is going to exercise this right.

In 2015 Russia - Putin amended Russian law to allow the constitutional court to overturn the European Court of Human Rights Decisions if they violated the Russian constitution. So far that has only occurred twice. So to what extent Russia is going to back away from international law to use this new constitutional principle to diminish international tribunal is something that we'll have to wait and see to understand.

Matthew Rojansky: Sergey, did you want to comment in particular on the likelihood of protest or debate or any...

Sergey Parkhomenko: Yes it's very interesting. Just another day after this Putin declaration an exchange made the most important and most (viewed) Russian opposition declare it (we don't) have to defend this constitution. This is a constitution who make Russians slave of dictatorship.

Matthew Rojansky: You mean the current constitution.

Sergey Parkhomenko: Yes, the current - the past constitution. The actual dead constitution. I don't agree with this. I don't buy this because it's not the constitution who make people slaves or not. People make themselves slaves or not. And this constitution to create a democracy. And even this cohabitation regime that Will mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. Even this regime was built because of this constitutional and of the time of (unintelligible) mentioned he had one year of this (cooperation) situation with President

(Yeltsin) and created by (Yeltsin) a opposition government of (unintelligible).

So lots of possibility, lots of checks and balances on this constitution, lots of guarantees of freedom rights on the Constitution and all details of the authoritarian regime was it just because the fraud of this constitution because of the (unintelligible) of this constitution. But we see now total a absence of activity of Russian opposition to defend this constitutional regime because - yes, that's all I think.

Matthew Rojansky: Let me - in view of time, let me go to (Ken Yovitz) for a last question and then I'm going to go to all three of our speakers and offer them a final word on anything they want to comment on. (Ken) please. (Ken Yovitz), are you there? Okay let me - go ahead. Please, your question (Ken).

(Ken Yovitz): Yes, my question is, you know, seven years or so ago, Putin did the quick change with (unintelligible) large crowds came into the streets. That has not happened this time. And I wanted to ask the panelists, why? And secondly, I wanted to ask what you're all indicating is the future of economic stagnation growing isolation more reliance on the Russian constitution rather than international law, whether or not there will be a reaction internally, you know, against this direction and that what we may see is a delayed reaction to this?

Matthew Rojansky: All right so (Ken) let's hold your questions for just a moment. Economic stagnation isolation et cetera. And whether there will be a reaction down the line. And I want to take one more question from - no. I'm being told we don't have one more question. Okay, great. So we will wrap up. Max let's go to you first and then I'll come back to Will and Sergey.

Max: Well, okay, so if we're talking about why nobody or very few people defending the constitution is that it's seen generally -- as I understand by the

general public -- it's a fairly abstract document that does not concern them in their everyday life. Traditionally legislation in Russia has been the prerogative of the central government historically not just under Putin. Not just under the Soviet Union. It's been Russia's history. So I don't think that - it's not like in the US where the constitution is something that - at least there is a debate about it. And the Democrats say this and the Republican's can say that. But in our case I think it's a fairly limited subject. So it's hard.

And also we have a very - if we're talking about the people positionally (sic) minded, critically minded people, one of the opposition politicians (Alexei Navalny) says that you don't need to defend this constitution because it's not a functioning document. It's super presidential anyway. So we need to find a way to write our new constitution, new laws that won't be, you know, those legal framework that Russia's current legislation is. That's basically the picture.

Matthew Rojansky: You're quite right. I am reminded Max, of the famous images of people who take up arms against the government of the United States. And they often give press conferences with a copy of the Constitution tucked visibly in a shirt pocket. That's definitely part of the style of American opposition. Sergey, we'll go to you.

Will Pomeranz: Well It is a difficult question. I agree with Max's analysis quite frankly that people don't think the constitution is a major part of their daily lives. It was a constitution that was - that emerged out of conflict and its only justification by many of the authors of the constitution was that it was better to have a constitution that does not have a constitution. So I don't think that is really a rallying cry for people to go out and defend this current constitution. And as a side note I think at least in Moscow there was obviously lots of protests in Moscow over the summer and fall over the question about Moscow City

Council elections. And I guess that used up a lot of the energy in terms of protests and that people decided that in the middle of January they don't want to go out to the streets again.

Matthew Rojansky: Go ahead Sergey.

Sergey Parkhomenko: I think maybe the most important and the most sad thing of all this stuff in Moscow today that it's not a moment of decision why is the role of Vladimir Putin on the life of Russian (unintelligible) constitution. That's the moment of decision - what is the role of constitution and destiny of Putin. It's constitution for Putin now. It's constitution - He has used us as instruments to cover just one Russian president. And historically it's a very sad, it's a very tragic moment. We have to live for years or decades under the constitution created to conserve Putin on the power even after Putin. Where it will be very difficult to change. It's very difficult to return on the path of normal constitutional development of the country.

Matthew Rojansky: Well before we end, (Ken) since you invited it, I want to offer maybe a slightly more hopeful note which is even though it's a low probability I think the idea that Putin is for his own reasons seeking to try to create more balance among institutions of power and to ensure that the national project spending which is vital for Russia's economic growth actually happens. In other words an injection of cash from the state. That I think those two things added together -- if they're not completely obliterated by corruption which is a big if -- you never go wrong in Russia betting on corruption -- if those two things happen that there is a prospect that Russia doesn't drift even farther in the direction of stagnation and isolation. But it's probably a limited prospect. With that I want to thank all three of our speakers Max, Sergey, and Will. And I want to thank everybody for calling in and officially bring this Ground Truth briefing to a close. Thank you all.

Coordinator: Thank you for your participation in today's conference. Please disconnect at this time.

Will Pomeranz: Thank you.

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