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THE CURRENT: What does Putin's government shakeup mean for his role in Russia?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network.

This week, in his annual address on the state of the nation, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a sweeping set of constitutional reforms. Shortly after his speech, his entire cabinet, headed by prime minister Dmitry Medvedev, resigned.

Here to explain what these changes mean for Russia and Putin's role in power is Angela Stent, professor and director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University, and nonresident senior fellow at Brookings, and author of "Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest." Angela, thanks for being here.

STENT: Great to be back on your podcast.

PITA: Putin's term as president in theory ends in 2024. This is a massive shakeup of the government. Is this Putin trying to create the shape for how he'll continue to hold onto power? What and why is this happening?

STENT: Ever since Putin was re-elected as president in 2018, the rumors have already been swirling: Is he really going to step down in 2024 when his term as president ends and he can't run again? You could also already see there was maneuvering; who might be designated successor? There were different names and then those names were shot down. So, I think he wanted to intervene and get a hold on the process. He wanted to create a path for himself to remain in power after 2024, even if he's no longer the president of Russia. And I think he wanted to set everyone off-base, so this kind of succession maneuvering can't really go on at the moment because no one really knows what it is that they're maneuvering for, since he's now proposed sweeping constitutional changes that will give much more power to the parliament.

PITA: Can I ask you to tell us more about those changes? They certainly look like they're giving much more power to the parliament, but that doesn't seem in keeping with his style.

STENT: No, and of course in Russia, nothing is ever what it appears to be. So, in theory, he wants to give the parliament more power, and that means that parliament will have the power to appoint ministers, including the prime minister, and the president, even if he or she doesn't like it, will still really have to take what the parliament says. That's what he said, at least, in his speech. And he proposed giving a larger role to the Federation Council, which is the upper house, where they will also have more of a say in who gets appointed to the cabinet. On the other hand, he also said later on in his speech that of course the presidency is still a very important institution in the Russian Federation. So one wonders, really, how much power he'll give to parliament, but by saying that, he gave the impression that if he wanted to become prime minister, say, in the future, that prime minister would have much more powers than Dmitry Medvedev, say, had as prime minister.

PITA: Let's talk about Medvedev. There's been some questions or thoughts that perhaps Medvedev's step-down – the proposed replacement, Mikhail Mishustin has been a very popular head of the tax service, created a great many reforms – that perhaps this was making Medvedev a bit of a scapegoat for Russia's ongoing economic problems. Can you talk about this, and who the new designate is?

STENT: So, Dmitry Medvedev had become quite unpopular. Russia has a lot of economic problems; the economy isn't growing, people are feeling the pinch, and they blamed him. Plus, Alexei Navalny, the big anti-corruption crusader in Russia, had made a series of videos, particularly about Medvedev, going out to his many, many followers on YouTube, showing how corrupt Medvedev was; showing these fancy houses he had, villas, clothes, shoes, in different parts of the world. So, he was certainly unpopular, and it was convenient for Putin to fire him, and he was really the scapegoat for that. He does have another job now as a deputy to Putin in the Security Council.

So, the new prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, very few people had heard of, has been a very successful head of the tax authority, and before that was responsible for digitizing much of the Russian economy. He speaks fluent English, he has very good credentials as an economist, and he seemed to be someone who, maybe, will have the wherewithal to tackle some of these economic reforms and improve the economic performance; at least, that's what people hope.

PITA: Part of these changes that Putin has proposed has to do with the State Council – as you mentioned, that he's currently the chair of this. Can you talk about the role of this body and how it fits into these?

STENT: So, the State Council is something different than the Security Council. But Putin is also head of the State Council. So this has until now, been kind of a consultative body composed of different representatives from different parts of the country. It hasn't done much. But he's now proposing a constitutional role for the State Council. Again, we don't really know much about what that will be, but one of the theories is that in 2024, Putin will say, "I step back from the presidency, as I have to, but I'm going to continue to lead the State Council." And the State Council will have an enhanced role.

Now, we do know, or we assume, that Putin really doesn't want to be prime minister again, even if he had more powers, because then you have to tackle all the challenges from the intractable economic problems, but as head of the State Council he could do what he loves best, which is represent Russia as a great power. Foreign policy, traveling around the world, meeting with world leaders, showing how important he is. So I think people think he might do that. And there is precedent for that, for instance, in China, when Deng Xiaoping was formally no longer the leader, but he had this informal role where he still exercised a lot of power; in Singapore, and even in neighboring Kazakhstan, where the president, Nazarbayev, last year left the presidency, but he's now the head of various organizations and he's clearly the power behind the throne. So, the State Council could be a way for Putin to maintain his fingers on all of the important issues in Russia, and in essence to be the power behind the throne, and yet not behave as if he's a Third World dictator by being President for Life.

PITA: These proposed reforms to the constitution included I think a referendum, which hasn't happened I think since the early 90s, in '93 – that was Yeltsin's day. What role would doing it in this fashion – what would we look for in that?

STENT: Interesting enough, Putin obviously wants public approval for legitimacy for what he's done, to give the appearance that this is democratic. He did not use the word referendum; he said there's going to be a popular vote, so people who study this say well, maybe that means he's not going to be bound by formal provisions for a referendum. But he's right now formed a constitutional committee to advise him; they already met yesterday. I don't think we're going to expect anything like the Federalist Papers or a constitutional convention as in the U.S., but there will be a body that will advise him on

changing the constitution. Then there will be a vote, which I think will come before the summer, but we'll have to see what the provisions are and what its legal significance is.

PITA: And what happens also now with Medvedev and the rest of the cabinet who also all stepped down. What sort of a timeframe and the process by which the new cabinet will be ushered in?

STENT: So the new Prime Minister Mishustin will have to appoint a new cabinet. I think most people assume that a lot of the old ministers will come back as the new ministers: the foreign minister, the defense minister, probably some of the other ministers. There is no set timetable for that, but one would assume that this will happen in the next few weeks. There will certainly be some new faces there; it'll be interesting to see what new faces are there.

PITA: As a Russia watcher, what do you think we should most be keeping our eyes on? What will you be looking for to give you some indications about what's happening?

STENT: Well, I think we'll have to watch and see how quickly Mishustin establishes his authority, who he brings in with him, and what Putin says as this process now goes on where they're redesigning the constitution in the next few months. I think we need to watch that carefully, see what comes out of that, and then we'll have a better understanding of really how much more power will the parliament have, and how much less power the president will have.

PITA: All right, Angela, thanks for explaining this to us.

STENT: Thank you.