

The Russian referendum

by GWYNNE DYER

'The very existence of an opportunity for the current president (to be re-elected in 2024), given his major gravitas, would be a stabilising factor for our society,' said Valentina Tereshkova, former Soviet cosmonaut, first woman in space, and now, at 83, a member of the Russian Duma (parliament).

She was talking about President Vladimir Putin, of course, and she was proposing a constitutional amendment to let him bypass the existing term limit and be re-elected in 2024 (and again in 2030, if he likes). The Duma obediently passed the measure, and Russians are now voting on the new constitution, but she paid a certain price on social media for sucking up to Putin.

'Tereshkova - the first woman who bravely travelled into cosmic cold and darkness, and then brought the entire country there,' read one post, retweeted by opposition leader Alexei Navalny. But Putin will win the referendum on the new constitution without even having to cheat.

This referendum is rather like a lottery, and all you have to do to win is vote. Text messages told Moscow voters this week that there will be 'millions of prizes', from hair-dryers to washing machines and on up. Provincial governments and even private employers are also offering prizes, and the central government is raising pensions and the minimum wage.

Yet Putin was bound to win this referendum even without all these incentives: in 20 years in power, his approval rating has never gone below 65%. The result might drop below that figure this time, because the country's oil income has halved in recent months and lots of people were already having a tough time economically, but it's hard to believe that it could fall below 50%.

So why this circus to achieve a big turnout and a large majority? Could Putin be feeling insecure? His abrupt dismissal of the entire government, including the prime minister, in January might be a clue, and his various public changes of mind on what the new constitution should contain might be another.

But trying to read Putin's mind like latter-day Kremlinologists is a futile pursuit, and in any case it's obvious that he has to keep his options open. It must be legal for him to run for re-election when his present term expires in 2024, because if he becomes a lame duck the struggle to succeed him starts now. No mind-reading is necessary to know that.

I would hazard a guess, however, that Putin doesn't actually know what he will want to do in 2024, when he will be 71. He might have to stay in power because he has made too many enemies to be safe in retirement, but he has never had a grand plan beyond restoring Russia's status as a great power. If it feels safe, he might just pick a promising successor and quit.

The main point of this discussion, for those of us who aren't Russians, is to remind ourselves that it isn't always about us. Russia has its own internal politics and priorities, and most of them are not about foreign policy.

Like any great power of long standing, Russia has a large 'intelligence' branch of the government that gets up to various bits of skulduggery overseas. The latest allegations are that the GRU offered bounties to Taliban fighters for killing American and British troops. (But why pay them when they'll do it for free?)

More plausible claims allege that Moscow's spies tried to kill Russian exiles in Britain with nerve poison, and that in 2016 they tried to influence the British referendum in favour of Brexit and the U.S. election in favour of Trump. So what? Washington's spies have overthrown governments from Vietnam to Iran to Chile, and spent a lot of money (along with their British colleagues) trying to influence Russian elections in the 1990s.

It's what great powers do, and it doesn't mean they are plotting global conquest. In particular, it doesn't mean that the Russians are

trying to take over the U.S. or British governments or planning a new Cold War. For the most part, they are just busy with their own affairs.