

world

Putin says 'transition' crucial

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● He is due to step down in 2024

AFP | Moscow

President Vladimir Putin has said he does not want Russia to return to the Soviet-era practice of rulers dying in office without a succession plan, as speculation swirls over his future after he unleashed a political upheaval this week.

The 67-year-old Russian leader said a transition plan for the country was crucial, in comments several days after his shock proposal of sweeping changes to the constitution saw the government resign and a new prime minister appointed.

Putin, who has been in power for two decades, was asked if he could consider removing presidential term limits from the constitution during a meeting with World War II veterans in his hometown of Saint Petersburg on Saturday.

But he appeared to reject the idea. "In my view, it would be very worrying to return to the situation of the mid-1980s when heads of state one by one remained in power until the end of their days, (and) left office without having secured necessary conditions for a transition of power," Putin said.

"So, thank you very much, but I think it's better not to return to the situation of the mid-1980s."

Soviet rulers Leonid Brezhnev, Yury Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko all died in



Vladimir Putin at the Piskaryovskoye cemetery in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Courtesy of Bloomberg

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VLADIMIR PUTIN

office.

Chernenko's successor Mikhail Gorbachev introduced perestroika and glasnost reforms to transform the Soviet system and presided over the eventual collapse of the USSR.

Putin, who is due to step down in 2024 after his fourth Kremlin term ends, said he understood what he called people's concerns about the continuity of power.

"For many of our people this is linked to worries about stability in society, stability in the state -- both foreign and internal stability -- I perfectly understand this," he said.

Many observers have said Putin's proposals are designed to ensure his grip on power after he leaves the Kremlin and

his critics have accused him of orchestrating a "constitutional coup".

On Wednesday, Putin stunned Russians with his constitutional proposals, including transferring more authority to parliament and enshrining the role of the State Council, an advisory body, in the constitution.

They would be the first significant changes to the country's basic law since it was adopted under Boris Yeltsin in 1993.

The announcement triggered the resignation of the government, led by Putin's loyal lieutenant Dmitry Medvedev.

A previously little known tax official, Mikhail Mishustin, was tapped by Putin to take over as premier and he was officially appointed on Thursday.

Britain's Johnson warns Putin over Skripal poisoning



British police issued European arrest warrants for these two men caught on CCTV in Salisbury around the time of the attack, who they said were Russian GRU agents

London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Sunday used his first official meeting with Vladimir Putin to warn the Russian leader not to repeat the 2018 chemical attack that almost killed former spy Sergei Skripal.

Downing Street said Johnson told the Kremlin chief on the sidelines of a summit on the Libya crisis in Berlin that ties between Moscow and London would not return to normal until Russia ended its "destabilising" activities.

Johnson "was clear there had been no change in the UK's position on Salisbury, which was a reckless use of chemical weapons and a brazen attempt to murder innocent people on UK soil," Downing Street said in a statement.

"He said that such an attack must not be repeated," Johnson's office said.

made clear that this dialogue did not mean London's relations with the Kremlin were back on track.

"The prime minister said there will be no normalisation of our bilateral relationship until Russia ends the destabilising activity that threatens the UK and our allies and undermines the safety of our citizens and our collective security," his office said.

Russian suspects identified

London and Washington identify the GRU as Russia's main security threat to Western interests abroad.

Both also accuse the agency of attempting to hack the world's chemical weapons watchdog in The Hague in 2018 in order to spy on its investigation into the use of nerve agents in Syria.

British officials have identified the two Russians suspected of delivering the nerve agent to Salisbury as GRU

Online campaign to save malnourished lions at Sudan park

Khartoum

Online calls grew yesterday to help save five "malnourished and sick" African lions held at a park in Sudan's capital, with some demanding the creatures be shifted to a better habitat.

The five lions are held in cages at Khartoum's Al-Qureshi Park in an upscale district of the capital, but for weeks now they have been suffering from shortages of food and medicine.

"I was shaken when I saw these lions at the park... their bones are protruding from the skin," wrote Osman Salih on Facebook as he launched an online campaign under the slogan #Sudananimalrescue.

"I urge interested people and institutions to help them."

Park officials and medics said the lions' conditions deteriorated over the past few weeks, with some losing almost two-thirds of their body weight.

"Food is not always available, so often we buy it from our own money to feed them," Essameld-



For weeks now, five lions held at Khartoum's Al-Qureshi Park in an upscale district of the capital have been suffering from shortages of food and medicine

dine Hajjar, a manager at Al-Qureshi park said.

The park is managed by Khartoum municipality but also funded in part by private

donors.

Sudan is in the midst of a worsening economic crisis, led by soaring food prices and foreign currency shortage.

On Sunday, crowds of citizens, volunteers and journalists flocked to the park to see the lions after their photographs went viral on social media networks.

One of the five cats was tied with a rope and was fed fluids through a drip as it recovered from dehydration, an AFP correspondent who toured the park reported.

Chunks of rotten meat covered in flies lay scattered near the cages.

The overall condition of the park itself was also affecting the animals' health, another official at the park said.

"They are suffering from severe illnesses. They are sick and appear to be malnourished," said Moataz Mahmoud, one of the caretakers at the park.

African lions are classified as a "vulnerable" species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Their population dropped 43 percent between 1993 and 2014, with only around 20,000 alive today.



Investigators sealed off their house in Salisbury, southern England after Russian ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned in 2018

Russia has repeatedly rejected accusations that officers from its GRU military intelligence agency used a powerful nerve agent to poison Skripal in retribution for his work with British and other Western spy services.

Skripal and his daughter both spent days in a coma but survived and have since gone into hiding.

The incident further undermined London's already difficult relations with Moscow.

Downing Street said Johnson had told Putin "they both had a responsibility to address issues of international security including Libya, Syria, Iraq and Iran".

But the British leader also

agents Alexander Mishkin and Anatoly Chepiga.

Both men entered Britain using false passports and were captured on CCTV footage walking around the southern English town shortly before Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found slumped on a park bench.

Mishkin and Chepiga later told Russian television that they were tourists who went to Salisbury to look at the local cathedral.

The open-source investigations website Bellingcat argued last June that a GRU officer coordinated the attack from a London hideout using his phone and a few messaging apps.