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# Prospective Political Transition in Russia

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The constitutional changes enforced by Vladimir Putin in January 2020 underscored his unwillingness to retire anytime soon. Moreover, in January 2020, he replaced Prime Minister Medvedev with Mikhail Mishustin, a technocratic figure with limited weight in the establishment. Put to the vote on 25 June and 1 July, the constitutional amendments provide for the possibility to extend Putin's tenure until 2036 and expand the powers of the State Council, a body that might allow him to lead the government without getting bogged down in daily politics. In any case, the 68-year-old President of the Russian Federation implicitly justified this change with reference to the need to ensure stability in government. He and the power centers that rally around him might as well use that time frame to groom his successor/ succession model. In any case, Putin is determined to remain in power until he has confidently shaped the future of Russia.

## Scenarios for Power Transition in Russia:

### 1. Orderly transition within the current regime:

With the new changes, Putin can stay in power until 2036 dependent upon his political choice. The best case scenario for the Russian President (and the security establishment that support him, called *Siloviki*) would be to use that time frame to groom his successor, averting the time constraints of the 2024 elections. Putin might also prefer to assume another post (as the President of the recently empowered State Council), leaving the relegated presidency to a trusted proxy. The successor will most likely be picked up among the inner circle (Federal Security Service (FSB)) or someone with its approval, who will remain loyal to the group and ensure the immunity of Putin and his family beyond retirement. As such, it follows the steps of the Kazakh transition.

Since Putin values orderly and sustainable transition, he might prefer a long-term president, which suggests that a younger and "energetic" figure might prevail. But since his inner circle are all in their sixties, Putin might opt for someone from the new generation of actors with ties to the security services, who could also help rebrand the regime.

A more calculated approach to succession might be to engineer a successor in such a way that a new equilibrium, which will preserve the balance between rival groups within the elite, will be sought to minimize possible infighting. As such, the selected personality will have to rise up to the challenging task of balancing conflicting interests among rival groups as a seemingly untouchable leader, which has been the hallmark of Putin's more than two-decade rule. The extant dynamics would thus require the new candidate to receive the approval of other groups within the security establishment and associated oligarchs.

### 2. Internal struggle within the current regime:

If Putin cannot manage this process due to unforeseen developments, such as his health (around which there is serious speculation), the establishment might move to dictate the next president. The key question is which power centers would shape the succession process. During Putin's accession to power, oligarchs



played a key role. However, Putin was able to tame their hold onto power. Today, security-intelligence, bureaucracy and the military play a larger role in the establishment, which is still kept under control by the Russian President. That old guard within the establishment is highly likely to preserve the current regime, a security state with limited private – not civil – rights for the general public. The security apparatus and societal control mechanisms appear equipped to handle such eventualities, even if their overconfidence might fail against the typical soft bellies in Russian history, namely the impoverishment of the lower classes and exhaustion of Russian ability to control its geopolitical periphery. Therefore, the security elites are likely to opt for managing the transition as an intra-elite compromise and strive to keep the society under check.

In either scenario, the successor will need an aura of legitimacy and consequently popularity. Indeed, this would be the weakest link of a Putin-designed succession. First, as Putin's demeanour and ruling style has ruled out any standing second man, one will thus have to be constructed before the public eyes. Second, Putin does not symbolise the decline of Russia. Rather he built up his charisma upon his ability to overcome the humiliation of post-Soviet era. Thus, his successor would more likely be a follower, who could have hard time explaining why he was chosen by Putin to carry the flag.

### 3. Collapse of the current regime:

Given the personalized nature of the regime, managing the succession appears more challenging than Putin and his entourage would assume. Unlike the Soviet times, no Politburo or similar institutional mechanism exists to regulate the relations among rival groups in a formal manner. Rivalry within the security establishment, which is restrained currently by Putin's orchestration of the differences, might lead to actors turning against each other in an open confrontation. Coupled with external interference, the intervention of still powerful business figures, popular protests, and economic difficulties exacerbated by the pandemic, Russia might experience a serious deadlock. However, even in such a scenario, the Russian bureaucracy has the capacity and political might to isolate rivalries from getting totally out of control, precluding a coup or even a violent uprising.

More likely, the rising nationalism/patriotism might define efforts to bring order during this transition process, despite all the economic hardships and a crisis of governance. The country may be forced to go to repeated election cycles in a largely contested fashion. This may produce a situation similar to the early 1990s, whereby the Kremlin's supremacy might be weakened by a more powerful parliament. However, the chances for a pro-Western president (President Yeltsin *par excellence*) would rather be slim. Instead, such a climate would play into the hands of a nationalist-populist current, who might at least offer a new shed of light in terms of popularity- again a role Putin has played astutely- to the grey bureaucratic rule in Russia.

In such a scenario, a new leader may emerge from within the existing political parties, or some figures not necessarily officially affiliated with specific parties. Nonetheless, the regional, generational, socio-economic and other divisions in a gigantic country such as Russia also suggests that a unifying figure will be very difficult to emerge from the benches of the opposition.



## Potential Names for Leadership Succession

Identifying such a name will be a difficult exercise, with several circulating. Most probably, in case of a transition within the contours of the current regime, the successor will be someone who is not often in the spotlight. Their name is unlikely to appear before the next presidential elections and then only under Putin's tutelage. Nonetheless, several analyses on Russia have talked of characters who are connected to the establishment and Putin in different capacities: Dmitry Medvedev (Former President), Mikhail Mishustin (Prime Minister), Sergei Shoigu (Defence Minister), Sergei Ivanov (Former Defense Minister/ President's Special Envoy), Sergei Sobyenin (Mayor of Moscow), Vyacheslav Volodin (Speaker of the State Duma), Nikolai Patrushev (Former Director of the FSB), Andrei Vorobyov (Governor of the Moscow Region), Andrei Belousov (First Deputy Prime Minister), Dmitry Kozak (Deputy Prime Minister), and Marat Khusnulin (Deputy Minister). One should also add the Putin confidantes such as Igor Sechin (Chairman of Rosneft, also known Russian "Darth Vader"), Igor Krasnov (45-year-old Prosecutor General) and even his former bodyguards appointed as governors such as Alexei Dyumin (Tula), Dmitry Mironov (Yaroslavl), Sergei Morozov (Astrakhan), and Yevgeny Zinichev (former Governor of Kaliningrad, now Emergencies Minister).

## Current Protests and Putting Putin in Context

Despite Putin's roadmap to stay in power or let a chosen successor fly the flag of Putinism, Russia has been beset by a new wave of public protests. They were revitalised with Alexei Navalny's immediate arrest upon his return to Russia from Berlin and are currently on hold tactically to focus on the upcoming campaign for September 2021 Parliamentary elections.

The recent protests have taken place in more than 100 cities across Russia, from Vladivostok on the Pacific coast to Irkutsk in Siberia and Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea. They build on Navalny's unwavering commitment to speak truth to power. Navalny made claims that Putin owned a \$1.3 billion palace at the Black Sea, which he said was paid by "the largest bribe in history."<sup>(1)</sup> Despite Putin claiming that "it doesn't belong to me,"<sup>(2)</sup> 100 million views of the video indicated that the public became more ready to listen to corruption charges against the Russian leader.

Regarding the protests, the Putin regime has proven able and willing to offset public revolt so far. Popular protests in 2011 - 2012 against Putin's return to the presidency and in the summer of 2020 against widespread corruption and deprivation were also strong yet were handled by the security apparatus. Early on, Putinism's strategy has been to fan the flames of nationalism and slander the foreign powers for their stance against the rise of Russia, a psyche bolstered by foreign military campaigns including the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Lately such motives seem to have lost their marginal utility, yet again Putin came up with the foreign-sponsored Navalny narrative. The Navalny anti-corruption campaign has put Putin on the defensive, and he emerged less confident in propagating his exclusive cause for defending Russia.

1 "Alexei Navalny: Millions watch jailed critic's 'Putin palace' film," *BBC News*, 20 January 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55732296>.

2 "Vladimir Putin: Russian palace in Navalny video not mine," *BBC News*, 25 January 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55799143>.

The novelty with the recent protests led by Mr. Navalny is Putinism's unprecedented inability to maintain the upper hand in the news cycle. First, Navalny appears as a political figure victimised and ready to sacrifice his life for overturning the oppression of a nation held in the hands of a few. Second, Navalny hits the Putin regime at its nerve center, putting the spotlight on its disinterest with the good of the Russian people and even worse its focus on personal extravagances. Third, Navalny restores the Russian pride in the honour of leading their own destiny on the streets and reclaiming the individual choice of the Russian people in politics. Last but not least, being the underdog, he is set to get more and more attention from the impoverished Russian people, even if this might not directly translate into political power.

The road ahead for Navalny is full of stumbling blocks. He has to convince the regime controlled judiciary to release him from jail and has to inject courage and optimism for change to the Russian public, who still have a high opinion of their saviour, President Putin. He also has constitutional hurdles for running in the 2024 elections, due to his residency in the United States in 2010 during his Yale fellowship. Navalny might not be the next Russian president but he might be the one to change the course either in cornering Putin to swim against the current and employ violence against public demands for reform or push him to make the hard choice of holding more onto power rather than making a risky delegation of power. In any case, the next Duma elections this year will be a major test of the popular trends and the power and extent of the opposition to present a platform against Putin's primacy.

## Conclusion

Although Putin faces an unprecedented challenge to his rule, demonstrating that he is not invincible, he still holds the master key in Russian politics. His choices and possible mistakes determine which way the political game will take in Russia. With his bureaucratic style of rule, even with the propaganda machine, he will be the one less inclined to blunder and risk the stability of the security order he has astutely established in Russia against all odds.

The Russian state apparatus, on its part, will heavily weigh in and take the harshest possible measures against opposition to the current regime. The recent protests are indeed bigger than Navalny, and express a strong and underlying dissatisfaction about the current state of affairs in Russia. In the ever historical dynamic of the Russian state (elites) vs. people, the critical line of illegitimacy has not yet been crossed over. Putin still stands as a legitimate and powerful political leader, even if he has lost some shine and polish. Russian people might ask for more, but they also remember that they might get less in a disruptive transition as they have experienced in the 1990s. Putin will thus carry the day.

Yet, gone are the days that the Russian President could feel omnipotent at home and sail to daring adventures in different parts of the world. Putin failed to play up to Russia's predominant role lately from Ukraine, to Belarus, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Nagorno-Karabagh, signifying erosion of hegemony in the traditional and long-time Russian sphere of influence, which is called near abroad in Russian security doctrine. On top of that, there is no doubt that the US, European states and even China and India will continue to increasingly



exert geopolitical pressure on Russia. As such, Putin's margin of error has lessened and his fears that Putinism will die with himself might haunt him more than more. The trickiest chapter of his rule is just beginning, when he has to face the domestic audience without favourable domestic and foreign conditions. Any move on his part to break this deadlock is now riskier than ever.