

LOST IN TRANSITION?

// Putin's strategy for 2024

Speculations about “Транзит” or transfer of power have circulated in the Russian mass media since Vladimir Putin got elected as the President of the Russian Federation for the fourth time in March 2018. The turbulent political events of the first weeks of 2020 shed some light on Putin's strategy for his future. In case he chooses to leave the president's chair, he will hardly be able to fully control the handover of power and will likely face some unintended consequences.



Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev prior to the cabinet meeting in Moscow on 15 January 2020 (Photo: picture alliance/AP Photo).

by Mikhail Polianskii and Vera Rogova

The first working week is usually the least productive time of the year. But not for President Putin. On 15 January 2020, both domestic and international observers were taken by surprise when a whole series of announcements promised significant changes in Russia's political institutions and personnel. These proclamations also represented the first decisive steps towards 2024, the year of the next presidential

elections. The plan has obviously been prepared way in advance and was set in motion with Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly, an annual speech which outlines the president's political agenda for the next twelve months. Among one of the most significant announcements was Putin's proposal to limit the number of presidential terms for one person to two in total (not only the current two consecutive terms). Moreover, the president suggested that a presidential candidate as well as high ranking officials cannot hold citizenship or a residence permit in any foreign country, which essentially eliminates a handful of competitors from the non-parliamentary opposition, who predominantly received their education abroad. And finally, the head of state controversially put forward the idea, that the president cannot decline the suggestions of the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, concerning the candidates for federal ministers. The State Council, an advisory body with largely ceremonial powers, consisting of regional and national leaders and headed by the president, fleetingly mentioned in the Address, is also to be written into the constitution for the first time and thus to receive real political weight.¹

Shortly after the presidential address, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev announced the resignation of the government under the pretext that “to implement the announced changes in Russian legislature the President should have maximum freedom”². The president added that ex-Prime Minister Medvedev will now take over the newly created post of the deputy chair of the National Security Council, thus remaining in Putin's closest circle, although with an unclear political future. On the very same day, the third big announcement broke: Putin suggested the

largely unknown technocrat and ice-hockey companion Mikhail Mishustin as head of the new government³. As in the case of the annexation of Crimea that took only three days, Putin moved quickly. Only a few days later, on 20 January 2020, a draft for the constitutional amendments⁴, 22 in total, was presented to the public. According to this document, the president will still remain the central figure in the political system of Russia. He will still propose the candidate for the Prime Minister, and remain the head of the State Council. Importantly, the president will now be able to officially bypass some of the federal authorities in appointing heads of agencies and services. The State Council, as expected, will get more responsibilities both in domestic as well as foreign dossiers, but its powers remain extremely vague. On January 23, the law passed Duma with 432 MPs voting “in favour” and zero “against” it.⁵

Putin's problems of power transfer

These events have sparked a good deal of confusion, rumors and speculations among international and domestic observers. While the exact timing might have come as a surprise, however, the fact that Putin moved forward with political changes itself was not unexpected. Over the last 20 years, Russia has increasingly turned into an authoritarian state. Despite decades of democratization efforts, such regimes have proven to be surprisingly persistent

and have even been on the rise in the recent so-called democratic rollback of the 21st century. At the same time, some features of these political systems make the process of power transfer – that is the selection of a new political leader – particularly difficult and a phase of potential instability.

In all countries, political power must be transferred at some point: when the period in office ends or when the head of government becomes too old or suddenly dies. The clearer the rules of power transfer are in such a situation, the lesser the likelihood of political destabilization and domestic power struggle.⁶ Elections in democracies or the hereditary succession in monarchies are examples for such mechanisms. In authoritarian regimes and especially in electoral autocracies like Russia, however, the formal and especially the informal rules of power transfer are often rather ambiguous and opaque, which makes this phase highly risky to regime survival. This is particularly true for personalistic political systems in which political power and also popular support are concentrated on a single person. While a replacement for the leader is very difficult to find, the loss of political power is directly associated with personal risks such as the loss of access to economic rents and even threats to personal security. This is why authoritarian leaders usually remain in office for long periods of time, often until they die.

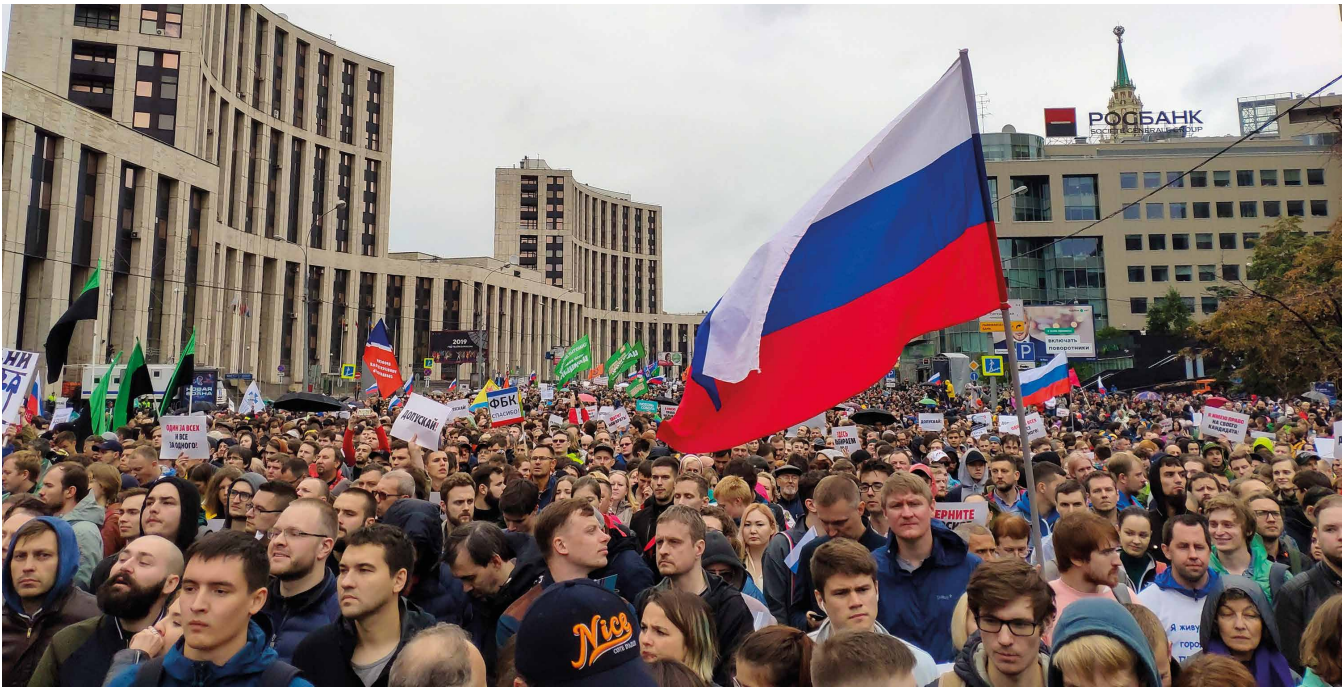
For Putin, the question of power transfer becomes virulent with the next presidential elections scheduled for 2024, when his fourth term and second consecutive term ends. As the current Russian constitution limits the presidency to two successive terms, Putin is unable to remain in power without any significant changes either to the constitution, or his own position within the existing framework. The quick sequence of events in the last few weeks has rightfully been interpreted as a first step towards the phase of power transition, although Putin's exact strategy is still far from clear. A question that remains is: Why now, almost 4 years away from 2024?

The long road to 2024

Part of the explanation might lie in the socio-economic challenges that Russia faced in the past few years. Although economic growth has slightly recovered after the recession of 2015-2016 and amounted to 2.25% in 2018, the country's economy is still in a difficult situation. Additionally, the effects of the stabilization have hardly reached the general public in terms of real incomes or higher living standards. Today, more people live in poverty than in 2014, and Russians increasingly perceive their personal economic situation as precarious. In the 4th quarter of 2018, as many as 48.2% stated that they could not



President Putin during his Address to the Federal Assembly
(Photo: kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0, <https://bit.ly/36EuMES>).



In 2019, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Moscow and other Russian cities (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0, <https://bit.ly/36EuMES>).

afford durable consumer goods such as a washing machine, only food and clothing. For another 14.6%, even the purchase of clothing posed a problem.⁷ A Levada Center poll from November 2019 found that 53% of respondents in the age group of 18-24 years would like to emigrate.⁸

As the stabilizing effects of foreign policy moves such as the annexation of Crimea are wearing off, this ongoing socio-economic crisis and the government's inability to solve them also begins to show in the public perception of the Russian government. Approval ratings for the work of the president Vladimir Putin and especially of the Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev fell noticeably in 2018 and 2019; in December 2019, 61% disapproved with Medvedev's work, while only 38 approved. His own and his government's resignation and the appointment of the technocrat Mishustin, former head of the successful Federal Tax Service, can thus be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate decisive action in reaction to domestic policy challenges.

A second explanation for the early start in dealing with the 2024 power transfer lies in the upcoming 2021 Duma elections. They may serve as testing ground for the public reaction and the suggested constitutional changes. Moreover, there is the possibility that the president will announce snap Duma elections, especially if – with rising political dissent within the Russian population – the political and economic situation starts getting out of control faster than expected. It is worth remembering that Putin himself

was elected in an early election, when his predecessor Boris Yeltsin surprisingly announced his resignation on New Year's Eve in 1999⁹, catching Putin's competitors¹⁰ off guard.

Scenarios for the future

The way the political system of Russia will look like in the foreseeable future largely depends on the decision Vladimir Putin takes regarding his place in the power set-up after 2024. But how many options does he really have? The experience of the similar Post-soviet autocracies suggests that there are not that many set-ups available after all. We suggest the following three scenarios to be the most realistic outcomes.

First, Putin might just decide to stay president by proposing further amendments (or interpreting current ones in his own way) and eventually run for presidency in 2024. The fact that Putin significantly strengthened the office of president for his successor might be just a "fog of war" effect, while in reality he just increased his own political strength instead. This solution has already found its practical realisation in Belarus where Lukashenko has been in power for more than 30 years.

The second possibility is that Putin changes to the position of the head of an unaccountable State Council. This agency, which consists of governors and other significant political figures, is de facto and de jure fully controlled by the president. This makes this scenario very attractive for Putin who just needs to

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find a loyal successor for the presidential position in order to be able to informally suggest any personnel and policy choices. With this, Russia could repeat Kazakhstan's path, where Nazarbayev, after stepping down as a long-time the head of state in 2019, opted for the newly created post of Елбасы (Elbasy) or "leader of the nation". Officially heading the Constitutional council of Kazakhstan, he remains the most powerful person in the country, while the president fully abides his decisions.

Finally, Vladimir Putin, for one reason or another, might decide to abandon politics and choose the successor he fully trusts in, and who will continue building Putinism in Russia. Putin might get a ceremonial position or even retire. But in this case, he risks losing control of the situation and getting betrayed by his own people, as happened, for instance, in Kirgizia, where the former president Atambayev got arrested and faced criminal charges after giving up power in 2017 as the head of state. Putin might face a similar situation, since personal loyalty can hardly outweigh an institutional one, even in such a political system as Russia's.

Unintended consequences as a prospect of change

Putin's risk-averse character notwithstanding, judging by his numerous public statements¹¹, he is likely to abandon some of his powers in one form or another. The abovementioned scenarios represent only three main directions into which the situation might evolve. We believe that the president is currently somewhere between the second and the third scenario. One of the most decisive factors in the decision-making process will be the upcoming Duma elections (most likely deferred to the autumn of this year, originally

scheduled for September 2021), where Putin should get a sense of his public support through the result of the "United Russia" party, headed by Medvedev.

But no matter which scenario is chosen by the current Russian head of state, there might and there will be unintended consequences. Any shifts and appointments in political structures inevitably lead to a diffusion of power. Just within the last two weeks, Russia got a new Prosecutor General, a new Prime Minister, as well as a few significant reshuffles in the Presidential Administration. Powerful posts are filled with younger politicians, making new power constellations more feasible. Eventually, the process of power transfer becomes increasingly unpredictable and less controllable even for Putin himself.

Notes and references:

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