

Putin's End Game?

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Speaking to the lower house of parliament on March 10, Vladimir Putin seemingly affirmed what many have suspected all along: that he intends to stay in power well beyond the expiration of his current presidential term in 2024. He did this by endorsing a constitutional amendment that would effectively reset his term count if approved in an April 22 plebiscite. Many voters may fear this is their last chance to keep him from dominating Russian politics indefinitely, and so it is possible the vote could become a site of contention, though COVID-19 will likely dampen any protest impulse that emerges. Citing the virus, Moscow has already barred gatherings of more than 5,000 people through at least early April.

At the same time, while most signs now point to “Putin for life,” his moves are nevertheless consistent with other possibilities – still including a power handoff in 2024 – that we would do well to keep in mind. Kremlin bosses have surprised us many times in the past. But even if current appearances are correct that Putin is bidding to stay in power for another decade, the Russian leader’s aging means the issue of succession will not completely go away. And speculation will likely intensify with each successive election, making the political system shakier rather than more stable as time passes. These problems will only intensify with the onset of economic or other crises. What may appear to be stabilizing now may later turn out to bring the reverse.

Putin's Succession Problem

Succession is widely regarded as the Achilles heel of non-democratic politics. When the rule of law is weak as in Russia, leaders who are successful in making themselves irreplaceable can also become trapped in office. To leave power is to leave oneself vulnerable to the successor, and successors are famous for turning on those who helped them win power, establishing their own political independence. Putin knows this well,

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having essentially done just this to oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who helped him win power in 1999-2000 but was a political liability and less than fully loyal.

Ridding himself of Berezovsky was one step in Putin's building of what I have [elsewhere](#) called a "single pyramid system" of rule, which basically means he sits atop a conglomeration of rival hierarchical power networks that compete with each other for money and influence while at the same time recognizing Putin's ultimate authority. Sitting atop this power pyramid, Putin has the unenviable task of keeping this competition manageable, finding opportunities for all who remain loyal, and resolving disputes that inevitably arise. He can do this effectively only so long as the leading figures in these power networks expect him to be in charge long into the future. When confident Putin has a firm and enduring grip on power, they fear his threats and take his promises seriously. Keys to his crucial aura of inevitability are his ability to mobilize mass popular support, to create a sense there is no credible alternative, to demonstrate competence, and to constantly convey vigor and acuity.

For this reason, Putin can expect major problems to emerge even before he actually leaves power. When the system's most important power players start to anticipate the president's exit, they will increasingly discount his threats and promises while at the same time start positioning themselves either to gain power themselves or to get on the right side of the most likely successor. The experience of other post-Soviet countries [demonstrates](#) this threat is real. Almost all post-Soviet revolutions over the past two decades have occurred when sitting authoritarian presidents were unpopular lame ducks, lacking public support when succession was on the table.

Why Act Now?

This logic explains why Putin is making his move now, with four full years to go before the current constitution requires him to leave the presidency. For one thing, the closer he gets to 2024 with term limits still in place, the weaker he becomes as the people around him increasingly angle for succession. Elections occurring during this period become increasingly seen as preliminary tests of strength for the looming succession, with different groups within the political machine attempting to demonstrate their value while subtly undermining that of their (equally pro-Putin) rivals. This can involve competing attempts to mobilize political machinery as well as public opinion. The politics of succession, therefore, frequently play out long before the actual scheduled date of succession. It is for this reason, for example, that Georgia's lame duck president, Eduard Shevardnadze, was overthrown in 2003 after his weakness was exposed in a parliamentary election long before his final term actually expired, as was Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005.

In the last few years in Russia, regional and even local elections every September were increasingly taking on meaning as succession bellwethers, and city council elections in

Moscow last year sparked considerable unrest and even some [opposition victories](#). But most important before yesterday was the looming parliamentary election slated for 2021, already being treated by political insiders as a crucial battleground capable of influencing how Putin resolved his “2024 problem.” By making clear now that he is no lame duck, Russia’s chief patron has essentially short-circuited all of these succession-related machinations before they had a chance to destabilize the regime in the runup to and aftermath of 2021.

Other considerations also may have factored into the Kremlin’s timing. It is widely [believed](#) the halo effects from Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula in 2014 are finally fading. And with Russia’s economy growing sluggishly at best, and with a big spike in public disapproval after an unpopular pension reform in 2018, it would make sense to act now rather than risk a major downturn in public support that could derail even the best laid plans later. The dire world economic forecasts in the wake of COVID-19 surely did not ease any such worries.

Choosing the “Azerbaijan 2009” Strategy

To hear analysts tell it before today, Putin was selecting from among an abundance of options for staying in power.

When Putin first announced on January 15 that he would be initiating major changes to Russia’s political system by constitutional amendment, many concluded he would leave the presidency and rule from some other post. Indeed, he affirmed the need for a strict two-term limit for Russian presidents, and tantalizingly proposed to transfer some presidential power to parliament and anchor the formerly informal State Council (a body representing regional leaders) in the Constitution for the first time. This touched off speculation he would rule as chairman of this body or perhaps even return to the prime ministership, where he sat during 2008-12 while his protégé Dmitry Medvedev kept his presidential seat warm.

Post-Soviet experience, however, [shows](#) attempts to escape term limits by moving to non-presidential posts are fraught with a risk of losing control despite this option’s apparent recent success in Kazakhstan. For example, dominant power networks in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia lost power this way in 2009, 2012-13, and 2018, respectively. Even Putin’s “tandem” arrangement with Medvedev led to destabilizing protests in 2011 after it was announced the longtime leader would return to the presidency. Putin seemed to acknowledge as much in recent days, [declaring](#) that if he tried to rule from the State Council rather than the presidency, this would constitute “dual power,” evoking frightening images from 1917.

Still others speculated Putin could stay in power by creating a whole new country, merging Russia and Belarus and then becoming the first president of this new union. This

looked hardly viable from the beginning: Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko would hardly agree to it unless he thought he also had a shot at becoming president of the newly enlarged state, something the Kremlin would clearly avoid. Additionally, Slobodan Milosevic's fate illustrates how this strategy can fail: Facing term limits in Serbia, he attempted to extend his power by beefing up Serbia's union with Montenegro and ruling from that presidency, but this triggered the famous "Bulldozer Revolution" that ousted him in year 2000.

In the end, Putin adopted what might be called the "Ilham Aliyev option." Shortly after entering his constitutionally final term in office and long before that term expired, the young Azerbaijani president called a referendum for March 2009 that included a provision making him de facto eligible to run for future elections. Ensuring the amendment passed, he had people vote on it as part of a large package of amendments (over 40) thought likely to be popular. He won handily.

Putin's move, approved by both houses of Russia's parliament on March 11, is very similar. According to the bill, term limits will not be removed and will in fact be strengthened, restricting presidents to two terms total and thereby forbidding a two-term president from returning to office after a hiatus. But with the new provision introduced on March 10, the sitting president's count toward term limits would be reset upon the adoption of the amendment itself, letting Putin run again in 2024. The Kremlin also borrowed from Azerbaijan in "burying" the crucial constitutional change in a long series of other changes, most of which can be expected to be quite popular. [Polls](#) have shown upwards of 90 percent support for many of them, such as the mandatory regular indexing of pensions.

And while Putin talks about his reforms giving parliament more responsibility and more power, including greater say in selecting the prime minister and other top officials, the president still retains the power to remove them and even, effectively, to force the dissolution of parliament. He also gains the right to initiate the removal of Constitutional Court and Supreme Court justices. Clearly – even by the letter of the Russian law, which is usually far from what matters most when it comes to power – Putin as president will remain the country's dominant figure. And the Kremlin boss makes no bones about it, repeatedly stressing that Russia will stay a strongly presidentialist country.

Is "Putin Forever" a Done Deal?

If Russian history teaches us anything, it is not to count out the unexpected. Clearly, signs now generally point toward the April referendum giving Putin the right to run for future reelection, his winning that election, and his staying in power as long as he remains in good health and avoids a calamitous drop in popular support. At the same time, one feature of "[patronal presidential](#)" systems like Russia's is that the person at the top can sometimes take steps that surprise observers, including trying to orchestrate some kind

of presidential [succession](#). We thus must keep in mind that Putin's moves to date are still consistent with certain options other than president-for-life.

For example, Russia's president said he would only support resetting his term limit count if the Constitutional Court finds it constitutional, so it is at least theoretically possible it could reject the amendment as part of a Kremlin plan to appear respectful of the rule of law. In addition, there is something of a precedent involved: Russia's Constitutional Court [ruled](#) in 1998 that then-President Boris Yeltsin's first term, which began prior to the adoption of the 1993 Constitution that remains in force to this day, counted toward his two-consecutive-term limit under the current Basic Law. Yeltsin, thenceforth, was a certified lame duck – unpopular, in ill health, and unable even to consider running again in 2000. Less than a year later, he named Putin his heir apparent.

A key difference between 2020 and 1998, however, is that Putin's amendments explicitly specify that his previous terms should not be counted, whereas the 1993 Basic Law included no such language. If the Constitutional Court introduces anything new, then, it may be to specify (drawing from the 1998 ruling) that a term served partially under the amended constitution counts as one term under that constitution. That would create an impression that Putin is submitting to the rule of law and bolster the image of Constitutional Court autonomy while still allowing him to serve another full decade, until 2030. Since the reform makes justices more subject to presidentially initiated removal, justices might pause a moment before approving the package of amendments, but even without this clause the Court has generally shown no signs of true independence under Putin. It thus seems highly unlikely to start now. Indeed, justices will be [asked](#) to rule on the package of amendments as a whole, so striking down one will torpedo the whole reform, with Putin still in office another four years to exact revenge.

Another interpretation is also consistent with the proposed constitutional reforms, including on term limits. By gaining the right to at least one additional term, Putin crucially avoids becoming a lame duck. This puts him in a much stronger position than before to hand off power to someone else, or to a carefully balanced set of people, when 2024 comes around. The right combination of people atop the presidency, prime ministership, State Duma speakership, State Council, and/or Security Council could check each other and thereby offer some security to Putin's interests. This would certainly not be characterized as divided power, and Putin could still retain some formal or informal position that could discourage any in-fighting from getting out of hand. We cannot even entirely rule out another try at handing off power to a trusted successor, or even to Medvedev, the one person now who has "proven" his loyalty through self-abnegation. In this light, removing Medvedev from the prime ministership, where he accumulated high negatives, and giving him a position on foreign affairs, surely helps rather than hurts his chances in the longer run.

Finally, we cannot rule out an unexpected negative result in the April referendum, or a wave of instability if attempts to manufacture approval are too extensive and blatant. Moments like this can produce unexpected results if enough people decide they do not want to see Putin—however much they think he has done for them in the past—as president for life and see this as their last, best chance to prevent it through the ballot box. At this point, Putin would seem to wield sufficient popular support—however “artificially boosted” it might be by state-dominated media and the suppression of alternatives—for people to grant him at least another try at another term.

Conclusion

Putin has now laid most of his cards on the table, giving us strong cause to believe he aims to stay in power for at least one more term, which would take him to 2030 or beyond in the presidency. Since he would be pushing 80 by 2030, succession speculation is sure to grow over the years. And if this combines with a drop in his popular support, which could happen for any number of reasons despite the Kremlin’s media control, the consequences could ultimately be quite destabilizing for Russia. The year 2024 will remain a flashpoint: either an opportunity for opponents to accuse him of illegitimacy if he chooses to run, or a succession election if he decides not to run. Stability now, then, may come at the price of instability in the not-too-distant future. Indeed, the color revolutions that Putin supporters so often warn about are phenomena not of democracies and not of parliamentary or even dual-power systems, but of non-democratic presidentialist regimes much like Russia’s that have inherent difficulties with the problem of succession.