

Leadership Succession in the Russian Federation: After 2008?

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In just over five years, Vladimir Putin will be constitutionally obliged to step down as Russia's president. Although Putin's popularity rating remains in the 70–85 percent range, and his reelection to a second term in 2004 seems almost assured, the nature of the post-Putin succession is still hard to foresee. This memo argues that given the continuing absence in Russia of reliable institutional mechanisms to ensure a peaceful transfer of power to opposition forces at the ballot box, 2008 will mark a crucial turning point for Russia's new democracy—the outcome of which may depend on the degree to which currently inchoate anti-American sentiments among Russia's younger generation can be mobilized by ambitious Russian political elites.

To be sure, there are reasons to be skeptical about predictions of long-term future trends in the turbulent and uncertain post-Soviet milieu. This point can be articulated even more strongly: not only did analysts fail to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; the majority has been systematically wrong about short-term predictions ever since. The dominant Western viewpoint in the early Yeltsin period was that a liberated post-Soviet Russia was prepared to undergo a rather smooth process of transition to democracy and capitalism. But by the fall of 1993, a cascade of sovereignty declarations by Russian ethnic republics and regions posed the threat of state collapse; a near civil war had erupted between President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Congress of People's Deputies; and mounting economic misery led to a parliamentary electoral landslide in favor of Vladimir Zhirinovskii's fascists and Gennadii Ziuganov's Communists.

Given such outcomes, the dominant paradigm in Russian studies shifted, and from 1993–1996, Western analysts seriously discussed the potential disintegration of the Russian Federation, the possibility that Russia might go the way of the Weimar Republic, and the prospects of victory for Communist leader Ziuganov in Russia's presidential elections. But the key story during those years (other than the eruption of the disastrous war in Chechnya) turned out to be the unexpected endurance of the new 1993 Russian Constitution, the creation of a Russian parliament that more or less abided by democratic rules, and the remarkable reelection of Yeltsin to a second term.

Once again, Western analysts chased the latest headlines: from 1996–1998, most Russia specialists seemed highly optimistic about the future of Russian democracy, and the heady economic expectations in this period were encapsulated in the memorable book title, *The Coming Russian Boom*. Thus most of the field was blindsided once again in the summer of 1998, when the Russian currency collapse and default led to a prolonged constitutional crisis and the disintegration of much of the country's banking system. In response, Western analysts began a

prolonged debate about “who lost Russia?” Many predicted renewed hyperinflation and territorial disintegration. Meanwhile, defying the pundits once again, Russia recovered from the 1998 crisis to record remarkably robust economic growth every year since, the 1993 constitution remained intact, and Putin’s election as president made the problem of renewed Russian state authoritarianism seem more pressing than that of state weakness. Given this track record, anyone with a good memory had to be worried when the consensus in scholarly and policymaking circles after September 11 was that the United States and Russia had forged a durable new partnership!

The point of recounting this litany of incorrect predictions is not to conclude, like Winston Churchill, that Russia is simply “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” Rather, we need to internalize, much more deeply than we have, two crucial facts about revolutionary situations such as that created in the wake of the Soviet Union’s disintegration in 1991. First, large-scale institutions do not spring up spontaneously, but must be created and enforced through patient and consistent effort. Simply passing formal laws or signing official decrees, however progressive and well intentioned they may be, does not ensure that they will be enforced in a consistent and predictable manner. Rather, this depends on whether or not elites can recruit a sufficient number of reliable enforcers to ensure that formal institutional norms get carried out in practice. Second, societies lacking stable institutions will be prone to unpredictable shocks from within and without, producing potentially disastrous shifts in political ideologies and mass political behavior. Living in societies with highly legitimate and reliable institutions thus tends to blind Western analysts to the very different social situation facing both Russian elites and mass publics over most of the past two decades.

Bearing these facts in mind, it appears that most analysts still do not emphasize enough the under-institutionalized quality of Russian politics in the Putin era. Nowhere is this the case more than in the area of rules for leadership succession. Russia’s constitutional rules for dealing with the death or incapacitation of the president are one problem. Since 1993, Russia has had no vice-presidency; in the case where the incumbent president is forced to step down, the prime minister becomes acting president and is given just 90 days to prepare for new presidential elections. Under such circumstances, the temptation for a politically weak acting president facing an organized opposition to postpone or cancel elections is high. Nor is this adequate time for the public to get acquainted with alternative candidates to make an informed voting choice.

The problem, however, goes deeper than this. Over a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has not only failed to pass Samuel Huntington’s “two turnover test” for democratic consolidation, it has yet to experience even a single transfer of executive power to the opposition at the ballot box. Even if Yeltsin’s triumph over Ziuganov in 1996 was a genuine expression of most Russian voters’ democratic sentiments, the nature of his departure in 1999–2000 was a disaster for Russian democracy. After the August 1999 appointment of Vladimir Putin as prime minister, one could imagine Yeltsin’s succession being decided in a promising democratic contest between two popular, reasonably moderate leaders—Putin and Evgenii Primakov—at the head of rival party organizations (Unity and Fatherland/All Russia, respectively), one considered center-right and the other, center-left. Instead, after the still-unexplained apartment bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities and the launching of the second war in Chechnya, the political foundation for a loyal opposition to the Kremlin was quickly and decisively undermined.

Nor was the situation helped by Yeltsin's sudden retirement on December 31, 1999. Strangely, many analysts, both in Russia and the West, have lauded Yeltsin for this act, proclaiming him to be the first Russian ruler to step down voluntarily. But in the wake of this decision, instead of a six-month period in which normal campaigns could be planned and waged for the regular presidential elections scheduled in June 2000, Russians simply waited 90 days for the inevitable coronation of Yeltsin's chosen successor in March.

Primakov, realizing that there would be no serious way to challenge a popular acting president at the ballot box, pulled out of the race, while leaders ranging from the liberal Egor Gaidar to the fascist Zhirinovskii quickly endorsed Putin (although Zhirinovskii then ran anyway, attaining 2.7 percent of the vote). The perennial also-run Ziuganov was left to pose as the main opposition candidate, but his party's decision in February to make a deal with Putin's Unity Party to divide up the Duma's parliamentary committees made even the Communists appear to be part of the new regime. The overall effect was to make a mockery of the electoral process at a crucial stage of post-Soviet Russian history (as well as to ensure that the 2004 presidential elections would also take place a mere 90 days after the conclusion of the parliamentary campaign, once again precluding a normal presidential campaign season).

Putin's first term in office has seen a dramatic worsening of this trend away from the concept of a loyal opposition toward a plebiscitarian concept of democracy based purely on popular support for the president. Once it became clear that the Kremlin (or more precisely, whichever shadowy network of oligarchs and security personnel one thought was manipulating the Kremlin) could successfully turn an unknown KGB man into a wildly popular elected executive within a few months, ambitious politicians throughout the country strove to profess their loyalty to Putin and to join the party of power. The Fatherland/All Russia Party soon disintegrated, eventually merging with the pro-Putin Unity Party to form the United Russia Party. Once this merger was complete and the Duma securely under Kremlin control, the pro-Putin forces kicked Ziuganov's Communists out of their committee positions in the Duma; Ziuganov has since tried to reclaim the mantle of the "irreconcilable opposition," but Communist rallies are more and more sparsely attended. The two main liberal parties—the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko—continue to feud and thus to divide and weaken the 15–20 percent of the electorate that has consistently voted for Western-style liberalism since the Soviet collapse.

Despite the passage of new electoral laws designed to streamline the party system, new parties tied to various oligarchs and Kremlin operatives continue to spring up and disappear again in short order, further confusing and alienating the public. Putin's reform of the upper house of Parliament, the Federation Council, has replaced governors and regional parliamentary speakers with political appointees who thus far have shown little interest in challenging Kremlin priorities; the role of political parties there has become insignificant. Putin's attack on oppositional oligarchs (and the media they controlled) has sadly stopped far short of a more general attack on the privileges and power of other well-connected billionaires. Meanwhile, continued FSB harassment and, in some cases, imprisonment of civil society activists and independent scholars undercuts the potential for new democratic movements to form at the grassroots. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising—though worrisome—that Russian voters are abstaining from regional elections at alarming rates, and that the idiosyncratic Russian ballot choice "against all candidates" has received over 30 percent of the vote in some recent gubernatorial elections.

The weakness of the democratic opposition in Russia obviously strengthens Putin's hand in the short run, and his continued high popularity demonstrates that few Russians care that much about the political demise of opposition leaders, most of whom come across as tired and uninspiring. As mentioned above, it seems highly likely that Putin will win reelection to a second presidential term in 2004 (although even here we should keep in mind the caveat about the potential for unexpected shocks in post-revolutionary Russia).

The long-term prospects for stable and democratic leadership succession in Russia, however, are cloudier. Putin may well try to change the 1993 Constitution so as to run for a third term; proposals to lengthen the president's term in office to seven years have also periodically been floated by Kremlin loyalists. Still, the procedure for amending the Constitution in a way that is itself constitutional is forbiddingly complex, involving supermajorities in both houses of Parliament as well as the approval of a supermajority of Russian regional legislatures. In all likelihood, then, constitutional changes could be implemented only by either ignoring these rules for amendment entirely—thus eliminating the democratic legitimacy of the document—or by convening a new constitutional convention whose outcome would be fraught with uncertainty and the potential for antidemocratic manipulation. Either way, a Russian regime still led by a “President Putin” after 2008 will, by any reasonable definition, have slid fully into authoritarianism.

Even if Putin steps down on schedule in March 2008, the systematic weakness of democratic opposition parties in Russia will pose serious problems for the country's first turnover test. Despite the apparent hopes of liberals like Boris Nemtsov that they will ultimately be victorious in free elections, it is still hard to imagine a pro-market and pro-Western ideologue, however telegenic, receiving a majority of the Russian vote. Nor do the Communists—at least as long as they are led by the non-charismatic Ziuganov—seem capable of winning the second round of presidential elections. Given the stakes involved, and given that the Russian Federation will by then have experienced nearly two decades of a super-presidency without any transfer of power to the opposition, it is hard to imagine both the oligarchs and the power ministries staying on the sidelines while untested candidates are allowed to compete freely for public support. Under such circumstances, the potential for continued manipulation—or cancellation—of the democratic process seems disturbingly high.

Still, one factor appears thus far to have saved postcommunist Russia from falling into the hands of antidemocratic ideologues: the basically anti-ideological orientation of the majority of the Russian public. Anyone who has spent significant amounts of time in the country knows just how cynical the vast majority of Russians are about the supposed ideological principles of Russian (and Western) politicians. As countless commentators have noted, most Russians say that their goal is simply to live a “normal” life in a “normal” country—hardly an orientation that is likely to generate widespread support for radical anti-Western movements. Instead, Russians since 1991 have behaved very much like the classic rational actors of modern economic theory—except that in an unpredictable environment lacking stable institutions, rational people do not waste too much time on investing in long-term business models, building large-scale public interest organizations, or obeying the constantly changing formal rules and regulations issued by corrupt state officials. The result is a low-quality democratic capitalism with little civic engagement and an economy heavily dependent on raw material exports, which hardly correspond to the aspirations of its citizenry but, at the same time, does not pose any serious threat to the contemporary global order.

The key question is whether Russia's culture of rational cynicism is likely to endure into the twenty-first century as a new generation of Russian citizens reaches maturity. Certainly there appear to be some important cultural changes occurring among the generation of Russian citizens between 18–30 years of age, whose adult life experiences have been almost entirely lived in conditions of political and institutional decay and instability. A sort of grim reliance on oneself and one's personal networks has replaced the assumption of state-provided economic security characteristic of older Russians who grew up in the Soviet period. So far, however, skepticism about ideologies of all sorts, including democratic ones, remains the rule among the younger as well as the older generation. Support for skinheads and other radical nationalist groups remains thankfully miniscule. Most young Russians are very familiar with Western culture, and have no interest at all in supporting a regime that would curtail their access to it.

At the same time, one senses a growing feeling among Russian youths that the West has simply written their country off as a serious player in world politics and treats it purely instrumentally. Of course, as in the United States, few people follow in detail the intricacies of foreign policy debates about things such as NATO expansion, European Union expansion, and the abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Yet the cumulative effect of what are perceived to be anti-Russian political initiatives has created a reservoir of anti-Western feeling that can be tapped in specific crises. Thus far, major spikes in anti-American sentiment have occurred only twice: once in the spring of 1999 during the U.S. military campaign in Kosovo, and again in the winter of 2002 after the various judging controversies involving Russian athletes at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. In both cases, the dominant mood quickly returned to a seemingly pro-American position, with about two-thirds of Russians in fall 2002 saying that they like Americans very much "as a people." But these episodes demonstrate that Russian anger can be tapped and directed against the West. Given the strong probability that renewed economic, political, and international shocks will continue to roil Russia for the foreseeable future—as evidenced by the terrifying hostage-taking by Chechen rebels in Moscow—wounded Russian nationalism could take unpredictable and dangerous forms.

Here, it is important to remember that mobilized minorities, rather than alienated majorities, make history. The two most tyrannical regimes of the twentieth century, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, were produced when extremist political leaders with initially tiny followings were able to capitalize on economic crisis, cultural anomie, and the absence of stable democratic institutions to attain and consolidate state power. From this point of view, it is a mistake to be too complacent about the long-term stability of Russia's weak and unconsolidated democracy.

How should the West respond? Some trends in Russian society—the alarming spread of the HIV virus, the demographic crisis resulting in a shrinking and aging population, continued problems of adjustment to a market economy in the housing and energy sectors, and geopolitical instability on Russia's southern periphery—are unlikely to be influenced very much by Western policy decisions. But these negative trends by themselves will not determine the future development of Russian political culture and state ideology. Instead, public perceptions about the process of Russia's integration with Europe, and with Western democratic capitalism more generally, will be crucial. Cynical young people who feel that they have a secure niche in the global marketplace—and less tangibly, who feel that they are taken seriously as global citizens—will likely limit themselves to the sorts of countercultural fads that are typical of alienated young people in wealthier countries. Cynical young people who feel that the world is run conspiratorially by powerful individuals who are utterly indifferent to their fate are far more

likely to be mobilized by anti-Western movements of various types. Every time problems like the status of travel to and from Kaliningrad, conditions for Russian membership in the World Trade Organization, Russia-NATO relations, and disputes over U.S.-Russian arms control treaties get solved in a productive and mutually acceptable manner, such conspiracy theories lose some of their cultural power. Given the essential compatibility of most Russians' values with those cherished by the West, a consistent effort to take Russian concerns about such issues seriously might pay enormous long-run dividends.

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