

Russian Elections and Putin's Succession

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With manipulating Russian elections and personally endorsing his successor, Putin tries to adapt Russian institutions to his own ambition to informally control the Kremlin after the end of his second term. Will Russia's political tradition of personalized autocracy allow the success of Putin's plan, once his successor takes his seat after March 2...?

A step backward was all that Deng Xiaoping had to do back in the 1970s to become the irremovable guarantee of market transformation and institutional modernization in communist China. Vladimir Putin, however, would need to make two painfully long leaps forward over the gaping abyss of Russian state and political transition in order to achieve the same goals as Deng Xiaoping, i.e. reinforce the mandate-based constitutional government of Russia and preserve his authority of informal (or semi-formal) "national leader". This feat, which proved relatively easy to attain in the millennial Chinese tradition of flexible bureaucratic control, is difficult, going on impossible, in the Russian tradition of personalized autocracy ("samoderzhavie").

Putin's first leap over the power transition abyss was deemed successful. The over-mobilization of the government machine in favor of the President's party, United Russia, the *de facto* abolition of free elections in Russia, the offhanded manner with which the opposition was dealt with, albeit its insignificant influence – all these measures combined enabled the power configuration behind the Russian President to establish a monopolistic control over the Duma. This control should not only secure the required majority to amend the Constitution, if necessary, but also provide viable institutional guarantees for Putin's power over the Russian government after the end of his term in office. Regardless of whether Putin would be the Prime Minister – which is one of the speculations about his future – or not, the Russian government could not possibly act against the will of United Russia in Parliament. For wasn't it precisely the disobedient majority in the Duma that urged Yeltsin to send his tanks against the legislature back in 1993...?

Putin is expected to make his second leap after March 2, when his designated successor should take the presidential seat in the Kremlin... while remaining a loyal successor not only of the policies that have been implemented so far, but also of the current President's ambition to retain his influence in the new power configuration (It is most likely that Putin's successor will be vice-premier Dmitri Medvedyev, nominated just yesterday for presidential candidate of United Russia and the other pro-Kremlin parties.) Would this balancing act with no precedent in the Russian political tradition – a double back flip over the abyss between personified autocracy ("samoderzhavie") and relatively mild authoritarian modernization – be performed successfully? While subservient to the Kremlin media are celebrating enthusiastically the first glamorous success of Putin's political acrobatics, serious analysts are rather skeptical.

According to Stanislav Belkovsky, Putin's power entrenchment in institutions such as the Duma is an illusionary guarantee for successful political survival. In Russia, power is personified, and when "Mission: Successor" is accomplished, the entire charisma – as well as

all the authority, which Putin now has – would automatically shift to the new “king” at the presidential seat. Michael McFall from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace believes that Putin’s attempt to entrench himself into power and monopolize institutional power resources – which actually happened on December 2 – holds a dangerous and unrelenting paradox. Putin is concentrating, and “conserving” for the future, institutional power, which should serve in his favor. The personification of this power, however, undermines precisely those institutions that are expected to preserve it to the benefit of the current President when “Mission: Successor” is accomplished. Personal authority and institutional authority differ in nature: the former is based on charisma and tradition, the latter – on unbreakable rules and procedures. The coercive remodeling of institutions – through manipulation and stultification of political choices, for example, as happened on December 2 – would deprive them of meaning and real power exactly when the by then former President Putin would need it most.

The preservation of Putin’s authority goes far beyond his own political ambitions. Russia under Putin is run by a small oligarchy at the top of state power, whose wealth and control over the Russian economy is directly and unilaterally dependent upon the political and administrative positions of the individual oligarchs. Should the change of President bring about internal shift in political positions – which is only natural and anticipated, especially given the autocratic personified power in Russia – tens of billions of petrol and gas dollars would change hands. This process would be highly unpleasant for the current owners of this money and for the political establishment behind their backs. The greater the change, the stronger the resistance and the destabilization of political power. Keeping Putin at a sufficiently strong power position after the end of his term in office seems to be the only guarantee against such destabilization.

The chances to secure such a guarantee are rather meager, judging by the growing tensions between the oligarchic fractions in the corridors of power at the Kremlin. Eventually, however, the success of political succession between the old and the new Russian President would depend above all on collateral factors beyond the control of the Kremlin and Russia, the most important among which is the price of oil at the global markets. The economic achievements of Russia under Putin are impressive, but fragile. If the growth of the Russian economy is not preserved at its current levels, the risk of political crisis of succession would become significantly greater. In any case, until the upcoming change is over, Russia would be a more difficult, rather than more unproblematic partner for all its neighbours and for Europe in particular.

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