

## Russia's Forever President



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**I**t is highly likely that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not leave office alive. This does not mean he is ripe for assassination; it simply means he has structured a system where he will be President as long as he lives. Just a few months ago, and for a brief moment, this did not seem to be the case.

In mid-January, Putin pushed through a number of changes designed to weaken the office of President for his successor. It was widely thought that this signified Putin would step down after his term ended and take up another role, much like Nursultan Nazarbayev had in neighboring Kazakhstan. He would continue to play overseer in Russia – nothing could happen without his approval – he would remain personally

untouchable from legal difficulties, but he would not hold the title of President, thus taking away one criticism leveled at him – that he was becoming President-for-Life. However, later that same day, it was announced that the entire Russian government had resigned, because “not everything had worked out,” and no one was certain what this meant.

Putin has become less popular as the years have worn on. Protests have grown, largely as a result of a very unpopular, yet necessary, pension reform plan, an economy that continues to stagnate, falling oil prices, a run on the ruble, and Putin fatigue. Unlike in some other modern authoritarian regimes, Russia is not rounding up mass numbers of her citizens, imprisoning, shooting, or “re-educating” them, and in so doing threatening others to hold their opinions to themselves. There are elements of an opposition civil society, and the Russian government has to pay some lip service to the satisfaction of its citizens. If the street protests become too big because life has become too unpleasant, then the Russian government, in particular Putin himself, is seen as illegitimate. By compelling the government to resign, Putin offered the people a sacrifice before they demanded that he be the one to be sacrificed.

Two months later, the Duma met to discuss the proposed Constitutional changes. Suddenly Valentina Tereshkova, the first female cosmonaut, “spontaneously” stood up and suggested an additional amendment that would allow Putin to remain President until 2036. Parliament temporarily recessed, while this request was discussed with the Kremlin, i.e., with Putin. With her place in history already guaranteed, Tereshkova was an inspired choice to propose this change: she does not owe anything to Putin, and she does not require anything from Putin in exchange for her loyalty. Putin agreed, if it were the “will of the people,” and both houses of Parliament promptly ratified the decision, saying it was necessary for “national security” in the age of the Coronavirus. With this decision, they gave Russia and the world Putin for at least sixteen more years, when he will be 83 years old.

However, even for Putin, with such forever power comes forever responsibility, and that is unlikely to turn out well, especially in the current environment.

In particular, because Putin has such a strong penchant for controlling everything, his tactics toward taking on the Coronavirus are somewhat unexpected: instead of the power vertical, where everything is directed from the top down, he is taking a *laissez-faire* approach. He has put the nation's governors and the Moscow mayor in charge, each of whom is responsible for developing his own response; in turn, each has allowed the subsets of their territories to make their own decisions on a local and district level. This diffuse approach has the potential to be disastrous for the nation, but it might be a saving grace for Putin if the crisis spins out of control. He can simply blame the leaders of the regions, who, in turn, can blame their underlings. In a return to Soviet-era non-decision-making, much like what made Chernobyl an even worse disaster than it otherwise might have been, the ruble can be passed from person to person, with Putin escaping responsibility.

Governors are now in the bizarre and uncomfortable position of having to manage the crisis, with the fear that if they manage it too well, they will be seen as a threat to Putin's rule, and if they manage it badly, they will be blamed and ousted. Much as in China, putting local authorities in control of any situation in an authoritarian state is a risky venture for all sides, with the citizenry likely to suffer the most in the end, as they become pawns in greater power games.

Complicating the situation is the fact that Putin has all but disappeared from the public eye. When he appears, it is only by video recordings that conspiracy theorists claim were made far in advance and released on a predetermined schedule. And he's acting very strangely, even by Putin standards. He tried to rally the nation to defeat the virus by reminding the Russians that they had defeated the Pechenegs and their relatives the Cumans. The Pechenegs were a nomadic people from Central Asia, who moved into the Russian steppe around 800 CE and survived intact until the mid-1000s CE, all at a time when Russia was not even yet Russia. What he meant is unclear, unless he's alluding to a vague "Asian" threat. More troubling, though, are his half-measures. He ordered people to take the month of April off as a paid holiday, but failed to announce a national emergency, while later suggesting that people self-isolate, meaning that they can't go anywhere on their "holiday." He left the details to his regional subordinates; some promptly quit. Businesses were told to continue to pay their employees, but no financial support was forthcoming for weeks, when the businesses started to complain

that they weren't making any money with which to pay their employees. Money finally came through. The question then arises: Does Putin even know what he is doing? Is he ill and unable to make decisions? Is he overwhelmed, as many leaders of better organized and better run countries seem to be? Or is he simply scared because he's finally facing an enemy he can't bully or bluster his way through? And what might he do if the situation seems hopeless for himself and his nation, especially if it means he will be associated with a massive failure and tens of thousands of deaths? The "guarantor of stability" is anything but right now.

All this reminds us how perilous it is to have large, potentially unstable, authoritarian-run nations in the world, where the leaders are unable to leave office. Just like for Xi Jinping, leaving office for Putin means almost certain death, always looking over his shoulder, paranoid with real reasons, not knowing whom to trust or where the bullet or bomb will be coming from.

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