Post-Putin Russia: Five Potential Pathways

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The short-lived June 2023 "rebellion" by Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner private military corporation, raised the possibility that Vladimir Putin's continued rule over Russia is not as certain as it previously appeared. Prigozhin has insisted that he was not trying to overthrow Putin, but to oust his rivals—Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov—whom Prigozhin has long blamed for Russia's poor military performance in its ongoing war against Ukraine. Further, Prigozhin claimed that the justification for the war against Ukraine (especially that Ukraine posed a threat to Russia) was false, and sought to give Putin a means to bring it to an end through blaming it all on "greedy generals." Prigozhin's rebellion, though, failed: Shoigu and Gerasimov retain their positions (at least for now), and Putin has made clear that his war on Ukraine will continue.

What is clear is that Putin will not take up Prigozhin's suggestion of blaming others for the disastrous war in Ukraine in order to end it on terms short of what now appears to be an unattainable Russian victory. It might not be until Putin is succeeded by another leader that Russia can do this. But the Wagner rebellion, even though unsuccessful, has raised the possibility that Putin is vulnerable, and that a successor to him could arise.

Putin, of course, may continue to exert his rule over Russia through the end of the 2020s, the 2030s, or possibly even longer. He succeeded, after all, in facing down the Wagner rebellion. But the Wagner rebellion raises the possibility that he may suddenly and unexpectedly fall from power some time soon. Nobody, including Putin himself, knows for sure when or how his rule over Russia will come to an end. But whether as a result of his death, incapacity, overthrow, or decision not to run for re-election in 2024 (this last being the least likely), Putin's reign will definitely come to an end at some point.

Just as it is uncertain when Putin's hold on power will come to an end, it is also uncertain how much or even whether Russia will change after it does. This article will explore the likelihood of five possible post-Putin pathways for Russia: 1) Putinism without Putin; 2) democratization; 3) prudent authoritarianism; 4) Chinese overlordship; and 5) the breakup of Russia.

Just as important, this article will also explore the possibilities for six of Putin's current domestic and foreign policy priorities to be continued or revised under each of these five potential pathways. These six Putin priorities are: 1) maintaining dictatorship over Russia; 2) maintaining or even enhancing Russia's great power status; 3) continuing the ongoing war against Ukraine in order to at minimum retain control of Ukrainian territory currently occupied by Russian forces; 4) continuing to see America and the West as Russia's principal security threats; 5) continuing Russia's strategic partnership with China despite any misgivings Moscow may have over increasing Russian dependence on Beijing; and 6) maintaining Russia's territorial integrity. First, though, something needs to be said about Putin's own commitment to these priorities as well as his ability to pursue them.

Putin's Priorities

Putin is deeply committed to the pursuit of all six of these priorities. He has ruthlessly sought to exert dictatorial control over Russian society through state security and military as well as private military forces (the Wagner Group) and substate security forces (Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's forces). Furthermore, he maintains control over all these forces through encouraging rivalry among them and playing them off against one another.

Putin is also deeply committed to restoring and maintaining Russia's great power status. Indeed, Putin has pursued this with something akin to religious fervor ever since he first came to power. Putin also appears deeply committed to continuing his war against Ukraine despite all the setbacks and costs that Russia has incurred from doing so. An end to the war involving the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine would not only hurt Russia's image as a great power but could even threaten Putin's ability to remain in power. Nor is Putin likely to change his mind about America and the West being the principal security threats faced both by Russia and by his regime. Putin fears the spread of democratization in the post-Soviet space via "color revolution," and insists that Russia is not just fighting against Ukrainian forces in the current conflict, but against the United States and NATO.

Further, Putin seems determined to continue Russia's partnership with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Despite China's taking advantage of Western sanctions on Russia to buy Russian petroleum at a deep discount and unwillingness to (unlike Iran and North Korea) sell arms to Russia for use in Ukraine, Putin sees Xi as an ally against what both consider to be a hostile America. Finally, Putin is determined to maintain Russia's territorial integrity—something which he insists that the United States is trying to destroy. Indeed, Putin's occupation of Ukrainian territory is an effort to reclaim for Moscow what Putin sees as rightfully belonging to Russia.

Putin does not seem likely to change a single one of these policy priorities so long as he remains in power. Indeed, for Putin, all six priorities are mutually reinforcing: To maintain Russia's great power and even its territorial integrity, Russia must be ruled by a dictatorship which confronts the hostile West, cooperates with a China that shares its view of the United States, and eventually defeats Western-backed Ukraine. Thus, Putin will continue pursuing all these priorities for as long as he can. Something truly drastic would have to happen which would literally force him to change course: the collapse of Russian armed forces in Ukraine, rebellion within the regular state security forces (not just Wagner, or what remains of it), or his own downfall. Until then, Putin is most unlikely to voluntarily alter any of these policy priorities.

Any alteration to Moscow's pursuit of Putin's policy priorities, then, can only occur under a post-Putin leadership. But which, if any, of Putin's priorities will be altered will depend on which post-Putin pathway Russia embarks on. What these different pathways might be, the likelihood of their occurrence, and how they might alter Putin's policy priorities will be examined next.

Putinism without Putin

This could well be the most likely pathway for Russia to take after Putin leaves office, at least initially. This is because the individual most likely to either be chosen by Putin as a successor or someone who comes to power after his death or incapacitation is likely to be someone who is already a powerful figure within the Putin regime. If "continuing the legacy of Putin" is the claim to legitimacy of this post-Putin leadership, then it is likely to continue all Putin's priorities, especially maintaining dictatorial rule, maintaining Russian territorial integrity, maintaining Russia's great power status, and continuing to see America and the West as the primary threat to Russia. It is possible that someone succeeding Putin who had been close to him may take a less sanguine view of China than Putin, but continuing these earlier priorities may leave the new leader with little choice but to continue cooperating with Beijing. The one Putin priority that his successor in this scenario might be amenable to altering is continuing the war in Ukraine. Still, even if such a leader were willing to end the war, he may be politically unable to yield to Ukrainian and Western demands that Russian forces withdraw from Ukrainian territory. Even indicating the willingness to do so could well undermine his ability to maintain support within or control over the Putin elite—especially those most supportive of the war effort.

The problem with this "Putinism without Putin" pathway is that even though it might be the one most likely to emerge after Putin, it may be difficult to sustain. The post-Putin leader emerging from it will probably come from one of the security services which has underpinned Putin's rule. The successor from this one security service, though, may not have Putin's ability (which proved to be shaky in June 2023) to manage rivalries between it and others. A post-Putin successor who does not come from one of the security services may have even less ability to do so. Under this scenario, then, a post-Putin leader claiming to continue the course set by Putin may be no more capable than Putin of prevailing over Ukraine but may have little choice but to continue the war due to the risk that ending it on terms unfavorable to Russia could lead to the successor's ouster at the hands of his security service rivals. The longer the

war goes on, though, the more likely that Russia's isolation from the West and mounting internal problems could lead to an internal political crisis resulting in his downfall. Thus, Putinism without Putin—and continuing all six of Putin's policy priorities—may be only a temporary interlude before a regime that shifts away from Putinism. But to what?

Democratization

Russia going from being ruled by Putin or a successor from inside his regime to democracy seems highly, highly unlikely. The fact, though, that Putin himself has worried so much about the possibility of a pro-Western "color revolution" inside Russia suggests that he himself sees it as possible. Putin, though, has built up such a formidable security service apparatus, including the National Guard, to suppress any democratic opposition within Russia. Indeed, it would seem that the only way for democratization to occur in Russia is if this was supported by one or more of the security services which have up to now successfully suppressed it—as has occurred in other countries where democratic revolution has suddenly and surprisingly occurred. Thus, although not likely, the possibility of democratization as a pathway for a post-Putin (or perhaps post-post-Putin) Russia is worth considering.

A democratic Russia could be expected to alter Putin's policy priorities considerably—but perhaps not completely. By its very existence, a democratic Russia would reverse Putin's priority of maintaining dictatorship. A democratic Russia would also seek improved relations with the West—just as the West would with it. But while the Chinese government may fear that a democratic Russia would join NATO and regard China as an adversary, it is doubtful this would occur so long as Beijing did not pursue policies directly threatening to Moscow (just like democratic Finland and Sweden did not seek to join NATO until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine increased their fear of Russia). And since a democratic Russia is also likely to want to maintain Russia's status as a great power, it could be expected to do so through pursuing good relations with China while also pursuing improved ties to the West. Finally, a democratic Russia in which ethnic Russians predominate will definitely seek to maintain Russia's territorial integrity and block any attempts at secession.

A democratic Russia would also want to end the war in Ukraine. But as public opinion polls indicating that the Russian public does not want to return all the Ukrainian territory—especially Crimea—that Russian forces now occupy, a democratic Russian government might not either. The truth of the matter is that much of the Russian public considers Crimea and eastern Ukraine to rightfully belong to Russia, thus complicating the prospects for a territorial settlement between a democratic Russia and a democratic Ukraine. And much to Ukraine's dismay, Western governments might want to accommodate a democratic Russia on this issue to some extent for fear of undermining Russia's fledgling democracy by adopting a harder line policy. A democratic Russia, though, could be expected to be more willing to end hostilities and take other measures to improve relations with Ukraine pending a final peace settlement.

Prudent Authoritarianism

Throughout Russian history, authoritarian rule has been the norm while attempts at democratization have been few and fleeting. In Russia, though, there have been numerous examples of a new authoritarian ruler dramatically changing the policies pursued by his or her immediate predecessor. In the late tsarist era, Alexander II sought to reform the harsh authoritarian rule of Nicholas I, Alexander III ended liberal reforms and pursued authoritarian modernization, and Nicholas II ended up begrudgingly permitting some degree of political and economic reform. In the Soviet period, Stalin reversed Lenin's more lenient New Economic Policy and replaced it with his hardline five year plans, Khrushchev reversed and denounced Stalin's use of terror against the Soviet population, Brezhnev ended Khrushchev's "reforms," and Gorbachev sought to reverse the stagnation emanating from the Brezhnev years. In the post-Soviet era, Yeltsin initially pursued more rapid political and economic reforms than Gorbachev had done, and then Putin reversed Yeltsin's democratic efforts. Putin's successor dramatically revising Putin's policies, then, is not only possible but would be something well within Russia's established succession pattern. This might occur as a result of a Russian military leader either ousting Putin or seizing power in the initial post-Putin period to crush rivals. But however it might occur, the possibility that Putin will be succeeded—eventually—by an authoritarian ruler who revises Putin's policy priorities is stronger than the end of his reign giving rise to democracy.

A new authoritarian leader (including one appointed by Putin as his heir) might decide that Putin's war in Ukraine has been a disaster, and so Russia must cut its losses and end the war as soon as possible to prevent even worse calamites befalling Russia (such as, from his point of view, democratization). Priorities that a prudent authoritarian ruler would continue from the Putin era include maintaining the dictatorship, maintaining Russia as a great power (even if a somewhat diminished one), and maintaining Russian territorial integrity. A prudent authoritarian successor to Putin, though, might decide that improving Russian ties with the West would provide the pause Russia needs to repair the damage caused by Putin's failed policies, and that sacrificing Putin's ambitions in Ukraine would be the best means of ensuring Russia's own survival and eventual revival. Indeed, it may be much easier for a prudent authoritarian ruler to withdraw from occupied Ukrainian territory than it would be for a democratic Russian government to do. A prudent authoritarian successor could also be expected to maintain cooperation with China. Indeed, he might take advantage of or even encourage a competition between the West on the one hand and China on the other to gain influence through economic assistance and thus enable Moscow to derive benefits from both while also maximizing Russia's international maneuvering room.

Chinese Overlordship

Increased Chinese influence, much less control, over Russian policymaking does not appear to be a highly likely post-Putin pathway for Russia. Indeed, a Chinese attempt to exert influence over a post-Putin Russia could well backfire despite increased Russian economic dependence on China. The leader who replaces Putin can be expected to try to preserve Russia's autonomy from China as well as from the West except under the most extraordinary circumstances. One way, though, that Chinese influence in Russia might increase is as a result of extraordinary circumstances that lead the post-Putin leadership itself (or a significant part of it) to seek increased Chinese influence in Russia.

How could this occur? One scenario is that the post-Putin leadership has little confidence in its ability to continue pursuing any of Putin's priorities because they conclude that the war in Ukraine cannot not be won, they convince themselves that America and the West are about to take forceful measures against Russia itself (as Moscow has long accused them of doing), and also that they see themselves as no longer being in a position to maintain Russia's status as a great power, preserve Russia's territorial integrity, or even maintain the dictatorship they inherited from Putin (perhaps because of infighting among factions within it). The primary goal of this highly pessimistic leadership fearing the West, the Russian people, and perhaps even rivalry within the various Russian security services would be to preserve the dictatorship they inherited from Putin. To do this, they might not only be willing to abandon Putin's aims in Ukraine, but to turn to Beijing for salvation. This might include asking Beijing to set up its more sophisticated surveillance system in Russia, send security advisers to "guide" Russia's various security services, send Chinese experts to help manage Russian state-controlled enterprises, provide Chinese support in suppressing the new regime's internal opponents, and perhaps even send troops to defend the new Kremlin leaders against Russian security forces or private military corporations (especially Wagner) whom they do not trust. Further, all this may be made palatable to the West through the new post-Putin leadership agreeing to a Chinese proposal for ending the war through withdrawing all Russian forces from Ukrainian territory.

In this post-Putin pathway, China would do for a post-Putin regime in Russia what Russia (via Wagner) has been doing for several authoritarian regimes in Africa: guarantee their survival in return for economic concessions as well as increased influence over decision-making.

The Breakup of Russia

Some see the relatively peaceful breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 into fifteen separate ethnically based states as opening the door for a similar breakup of the Russian Federation which also has numerous ethnically based subdivisions (most of which are called "autonomous republics"). Of course, various Russian-dominated regions—such as the Russian Far East—might also try to assert their independence. The relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, though, was facilitated by unusual circumstances: an agreement between Boris Yeltsin (then the president of the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic, which was the largest constituent republic within the Soviet Union) and the leaders of other Soviet republics to dissolve the USSR—and

this decision being accepted by the then-weakened Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Such circumstances are unlikely to be replicated.

But just because the breakup of Russia is highly unlikely does not mean that it cannot occur. Indeed, this is something that Putin himself has raised the specter of. If the breakup of Russia ever does occur, though, it is likely to be far messier and more violent than the breakup of the Soviet Union was. Moscow's inability to maintain Russian territorial integrity would also make it difficult to maintain a post-Putin regime in Moscow that "lost Russia," much less maintain Russia's status as a great power or continue the war in Ukraine. But even the end of Russian government involvement in the war in Ukraine might not end the conflict there if local Russian nationalists continue to resist Ukrainian government efforts to retake lost territory. The various secessionist governments rising up within the borders of the Russian Federation as well as the rump regime in Moscow could be expected to seek external support from the West, China, both of them, and/or others still against their rivals. And various external powers will undoubtedly seek to influence the situation partly to limit the ability of others to do so. Competition within Russia between rival forces seeking control over all or even parts of Russia's vast nuclear arsenal—as well as external powers possibly supporting them—will make the situation all the more fraught. Like nuclear war, the breakup of Russia may be a low probability event, but one that would have devastating consequences if it ever did occur.

Which Path Will Russia Take?

It is not possible now to tell what pathway Russia might take after the end of Putin's rule. Indeed, it might not be clear what pathway it is on even after it ends. Indeed, there may well be a confusing period, much like the 1990s, when Russia's future is highly uncertain, or that it appears to embark on one path but may end up on another one altogether. I have argued here that Putinism without Putin is the most likely pathway immediately following Putin, but that this will be difficult to sustain, especially if Putin's successor cannot keep control over rival factions within the security elite the way that Putin had managed to do up until the June 2023 Wagner rebellion. Of course, if Putin is ousted by elements within his own security forces anxious to preserve both Russia and the armed forces from further damage being caused by the continuation of the war in Ukraine, he may be succeeded immediately by the prudent authoritarian pathway. But if this does not succeed and rivalry among Putin's successors cannot be contained, this might lead some of them to seek protection through Chinese overlordship. Elite conflict may also set the stage for the breakup of Russia.

Western governments, including the United States, would undoubtedly prefer that Russia embark on the democratic pathway after Putin. But Russia seems especially unlikely to go from rule by Putin directly to democratization considering the strength of the security forces built up by Putin to suppress democratic movements. A period of stable prudent authoritarianism, though, might provide the best prospect for a negotiated transition to democracy in Russia later on. Until that occurs (and it might not occur for a considerable period of time), Western governments should focus on doing what they can to avoid pushing Putin's successors onto the more negative pathways of prolonged Putinism without Putin, Chinese overlordship, or the breakup of Russia with all the conflicts and potential loss of central control over the Russian nuclear arsenal that this would entail. An essential element for managing this will be for the West to signal to the Russian population and elites that while the West expects Russian forces to withdraw from Ukrainian territory, the West does not seek the breakup of Russia. In other words: the West supports the territorial integrity not just of Ukraine, but of Russia too. Western governments should reassure them that the West does not expect Russia to join NATO, but is willing to work with a Russia that is great power enough to balance between the West and China, and that Moscow does not need to subordinate itself to Beijing due to unfounded fears about a Western threat. Finally, the West needs to signal to the Russian population and elites that while it opposes Putinist expansionism, it seeks to cooperate with a Russia that behaves reassuringly toward its neighbors and toward the West.

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