

Putin Returns

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JANUSZ BUGAJSKI, SEP 28 2011

The return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Presidency will scuttle the forlorn hope of political and economic liberalization in Russia and is likely to sharpen relations with the West. Putin's nomination for President has been formally confirmed in Moscow in recent days and with the presidential mandate extended to six years and two terms, Putin will remain in power until 2024, barring assassination or revolution, and will become Russia's longest ruling leader since Stalin.

In his first eight-years as President, Putin oversaw an economic boom due to a significant rise in global oil prices, while his macho image and assertive policies helped restore Russia's self-confidence and global stature. He temporarily surrendered the presidency to Medvedev for one term to maintain the façade of constitutionality but undermined any attempts by his younger apprentice to reform a system of bureaucratic and kleptocratic capitalism.

However, the petro boom of the last decade temporarily disguised the fact that Putinism failed to ensure a stable authoritarian system in which a "managed democracy" was compatible with economic competitiveness. Without extensive political and legal reforms, which are strongly resisted by the ruling elite, modernization has stuttered, foreign capital remains limited, and Russia faces an escalating domestic crisis fuelled by economic weakness and demographic decline.

Domestic developments will also have significant security and foreign policy repercussions. In a scenario reminiscent of the decaying Soviet Union, Russia's deepening stagnation will increase the prospect of state fracture if the central authorities cannot contain pressures exacerbated by economic distress, ethnic discontent, and religious radicalism in the country's numerous restless regions. This will have an immediate impact on Moscow's many neighbors who could be drawn into a maze of border conflicts and territorial disputes.

Putin remains a highly popular figure among Russia's masses. The majority seem willing to jettison democracy for an effective authoritarianism that can restore Russia's international prestige and great power status while ensuring economic predictability. But while huge revenues from oil and gas sales helped to raise Putin's positive image during the 2000's, his return to power may coincide with another global recession and falling energy prices that will shake the foundations of the Russian economy.

Economists believe that Putin's return to the Kremlin makes it less likely that Russia will reduce its dependence on natural resources where oil and gas earnings constitute about half the annual budget. Moreover, Putin is unwilling to combat the bureaucracy and corruption that service his regime but obstruct and endanger economic development. He will have twelve more years to preside over a Russia that is poised between an assertive global role and a potentially violent contraction. He is not known for his willingness to compromise or surrender Russia's imperial gains, indicating that a new "time of troubles" (*Smutnoe Vremya*) is looming on the horizon.

On the international front, Putin looks set to follow a two-pronged approach. First, Moscow will continue to exert pressure on near neighbors to discard membership of Western institutions and integrate with Russia-led structures including the Customs Union that currently includes Belarus and Kazakhstan and into which Moscow seeks to entrap Ukraine and several Central Asian states.

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Moscow also intends to transform the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into a more effective body strictly controlled by Russian decision-makers. CSTO Secretary-General, Nikolai Bordyuzha, has initiated proposals to employ the organization as a mechanism for Russian intervention within member countries that were once loyal Soviet republics. Political planners in Moscow are fearful of Arab-type revolutions anywhere in their neighborhood, as they could prove contagious in Russia itself. In claiming an “area of responsibility” that coincides with the defunct Soviet Union, Moscow is developing several scenarios where military intervention would be warranted.

For instance, the organization may become directly involved if the head of the state is cornered by the domestic opposition and requests CSTO assistance. In such a case, the CSTO could intervene politically and militarily to “protect the constitutional order” and help eliminate social or ethnic unrest. The Russian General Staff has accelerated preparations for creating CSTO forces on standby for possible intervention and such missions would not require approval by the United Nations Security Council.

Second, Putin will seek to extract even more concessions and benefits from the American administration. The White House claims it expects more progress in the “reset” with Moscow, regardless of who is the next Russian president. History indicates that U.S.-Russia relations pass through “boom and bust” cycles in which periods of détente and cooperation are followed by frosty episodes usually precipitated by Moscow’s aggression toward a neighbor or its blocking of American diplomatic initiatives.

Rather than deepening the current detente to develop a strategic partnership with the U.S., Putin will seek to adapt the “reset” to Russia’s advantage by making sure that Washington remains largely silent on his integrative approach toward Central Asia, his bullying of Georgia, his pressure on Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to withdraw from EU-sponsored energy pipelines, and Moscow’s increasingly repressive domestic human rights record.

Washington will be tested when the screws are further tightened to prevent public unrest and regional separatism. With elections results prearranged and the opposition harassed and marginalized, will Putin be renamed as the second last dictator in Europe, or will that appellation be reserved for Belarusian President Lukashenka alone? This will indicate whether the West still sees Russia as a political part of Europe or has concluded that the country cannot be changed and the days of democratization have become a historical footnote

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