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Understanding the Factors That Will Impact the Succession to Vladimir Putin as Russian President

Since Tsarist times, creating a successful political succession has always been a challenge for Russia. Managing the transition from one autocratic leader to another can be fraught with tension, instability, and danger. At the age of 67, President Vladimir Putin has begun to face the difficult decisions necessary for a transfer of power that ensures the preservation of his legacy and financial empire, as well as his personal safety and that of his family.

Two weeks after he was sworn in as president for his fourth term on May 7, 2018, Putin told participants at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum that he would step down in 2024, when his term ends. This would conform with the current Russian constitution, which prohibits anyone from serving more than two consecutive terms as president. Almost immediately, speculation intensified in Moscow over whether Putin would actually leave the presidency and, if he did, who would succeed him.

On January 15, 2020, Putin launched a bold new process. In a move that surprised Russian politicians and analysts, Putin used his annual state-of-the-nation

speech to announce a government reshuffle and proposed a group of constitutional amendments to alter state structures. Putin named a technocrat, former head of the tax service Mikhail Mishustin, as prime minister; former prime minister and president Dmitri Medvedev was appointed deputy head of Russia's National Security Council. Putin said that Russia would remain a "strong presidential republic," although his proposed constitutional changes would limit future presidents to two total terms in office.¹ The changes would give more power to the Duma (the lower house of the Russian Federal Assembly), including the right to appoint the prime minister and cabinet. The power of the State Council, which Putin heads, would also be increased.²

On March 10, Putin shifted course again. He agreed to a proposal launched in the Duma that would reset the constitutional term-limit clock. In theory, this reset would allow him to serve two additional terms of six years each after his current term ends in 2024, extending his time as president until 2036. The plan was to submit the constitutional amendments for public approval in an April 22 referendum, but after the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic struck Russia, the referendum was postponed.

The referendum was held during the last week of June; the Central Election Commission reported that 79 percent of the public had voted in favor of the amendments, with a turnout of over 65 percent. The vote endorsed Putin's changes, but there were numerous charges of fraud, and over a third of the residents of Moscow and several other regions voted against the amendments. This opposition reflects polling data which showed Putin's popularity dropping significantly during the pandemic.

This vote opens up numerous possible options for Putin, and, perhaps more importantly, puts off what Putin

himself feared—a scramble among the Russian elites to identify a successor and adjust their political and financial positions accordingly in the runup to any leadership change. Putin will have more time and flexibility to decide on the final course of succession that he will choose. In particular, these changes could still give Putin several different paths to maintaining control of Russian politics and ensuring the continuation of his policies and legacy.

The stakes for Russia are high. Putin has been either president or prime minister of Russia since 1999. His personality and policies have dominated the nation, and he has played a large role on the world stage.³ Russia is arguably stronger and more influential in international affairs than when he became president. At the same time, some of Putin's domestic and international decisions have limited Russia's growth and influence. His reluctance to adopt needed economic reforms (e.g., guarantees of greater property rights, decentralization of decisionmaking, genuine rule of law) have hurt the country; for years, Russia's economy has experienced little to no growth, and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic will only exacerbate Russia's economic problems. In addition, Putin's decisions to seize Crimea and to infiltrate and control the Ukrainian Donbas have had negative consequences, as have Russia's cyberattacks and attempts to influence elections in the United States and Europe. The imposition of serious Western sanctions and Russia's partial isolation from the West have contributed to Russia's economic stagnation at home, with incomes dropping substantially over the past six years.

The stakes for the United States in the Russian succession are also substantial. The choice of a successor will fundamentally affect U.S. foreign and security policy for the following reasons:

- Given Russia’s weak state institutions, the power of the Russian president can be all-encompassing and unchecked; the Russian president’s personal views can affect vital U.S. interests around the globe.
- Russia remains the only nation in the world that has the capability to destroy the United States with its nuclear weapons. The power to do that rests in the hands of the Russian president.
- Any new Russian president will have to choose whether to continue or modify Putin’s open hostility to the post–World War II liberal order that the United States helped to develop. Putin would prefer an international system, based on a multipolar vision of the world, in which U.S. power and influence are curtailed or countered.

This Perspective provides a framework to guide policymakers’ understanding of the Russian succession process—in whatever form it takes. The Perspective includes the following topics:

- the key political, economic, and social factors that will influence any Russian succession
- a variety of succession scenarios
- the history of previous Russian successions and these successions’ effects for the United States
- suggestions for managing a Russian transition.

In addition to the written sources acknowledged in the text, I have drawn on my own experience working for the U.S. State Department on Soviet and Russian affairs for over three decades, as well as numerous private conversations with colleagues in and out of government who share my interest in better understanding Russia and trying to build a safer future together for our two countries.

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Key Factors in Any Russian Succession

During his tenure as president and prime minister, Putin built up his own power and diminished the power of most other institutions and individuals. He has come to embody the Russian state personally, a concept captured by then–Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Vyacheslav Volodin, who told the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi in October 2014 that “[s]o long as there is Putin, there will be Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia.”²⁴ While the Russian security services and other parts of the Russian bureaucracy remain powerful, most government institutions have lost power and possess limited influence on succession decisions.

Putin has become the indispensable center on which Russian political life turns. This has led analysts to compare Putin with the former Russian tsars.⁵ He certainly does not make every decision, but no major decisions are made without his consent. When Putin does not decide, major issues can go unresolved. Absent institutions with elite and popular support, Putin has come to embody the very legitimacy of the government. This is why his poll ratings are so closely watched.

Real politics in Russia are patrimonial. Decisions frequently turn on personal, informal connections. For example, business deals and money can be political drivers as much as good policy ideas. Putin often is the arbiter and sometimes a financial player in key decisions. In a nation where personal relationships are the focus of political life, it is impossible for many to imagine a Russia without this man playing this critical personal role. As one senior Russian official said, it would be like trying to move a spider web from one tree to another—nearly impossible.

It is impossible to predict what will transpire over the next four years and beyond. He will not, however, make his decision in a vacuum. Numerous factors will undoubtedly play their parts in his calculations. Some factors might have a direct causal effect on the succession; others will serve as important influences on the calculations of Putin and his potential successor(s). Moreover, many of these factors could have an effect on any debate over policy changes that might occur if Putin does step aside. Many Russian entities could have some influence on these policy deliberations. In Table 1, I list some of the key entities with a potential role in the succession and then describe each in the discussion of transition dynamics that follows.

Any analysis of the dynamics that will come into play during a transition to a new Russian president will require careful estimates of the factors that will influence Putin in his choice of a successor or succession plan. This section briefly describes the most-critical factors related to the transition to a new president. This list is not exhaustive, and factors could change as the succession approaches.

The Most-Critical Factors in Russia's Succession

The four most critical factors in Russia's succession are

- tensions among the Russian elites and rivalries among the clans
- role of the *siloviki* and the security services
- the economic challenge
- public dissatisfaction.

Tensions Among the Russian Elites and Rivalries Among the Clans

Russia's stability and legitimacy are based heavily on a consensus of elite support for Putin and public acquiescence, not on enduring institutions. One of Putin's achievements as president has been to manage the Russian elites and balance competition among the various clans. The effect of the coronavirus will undoubtedly produce further strain, although Putin clearly hopes the creation of a possible extension to his presidency will minimize some of the intraelite fighting. Putin continues to rely on the allegiance and support of his original Leningrad clan (the "Ozera Dacha" group and others). He also remains closely allied with his former security service colleagues (the *siloviki*),

TABLE 1.
Key Russian Entities with a Possible Role in the Succession

Entity	Notes
The Russian elite	Informal groupings of individuals, or “clans,” bound by friendship, kinship, common interests, business ties, regional affiliations, etc.
Oligarchs	Business leaders of the former Soviet republics who accumulated wealth in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.
Russian security services (<i>siloviki</i>)	<i>Siloviki</i> translates as “people of force” or “strongmen”; denotes uniformed services, including the police, the National Guard, national security organizations, and other structures.
The military	The armed forces of the Russian Federation, consisting of more than 1 million active personnel and more than 2.5 million reserve personnel.
Regional leaders	Leaders of Russia’s 85 regional governments.
The Orthodox church	One of the largest ecclesiastically independent Eastern Orthodox Churches in the world; under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill since January 2009.
The public	Russia has a population of 145 million, but faces serious demographic problems.
The opposition	Includes the Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party, moderate, and ultranationalist candidates, as well as members of the liberal democratic opposition.
The media	State-owned national television, radio, print, and Internet outlets, as well as a small number of independent outlets, which are mostly online; some are headquartered abroad.

who continue to occupy key positions in the Kremlin and security agencies. However, fractures are appearing among members of that group.

The astute political analyst and consultant Gleb Pavlovsky recognized this even before the March 2018 presidential election. He told Neil MacFarquhar of the *New York Times* that the March 2018 presidential election

itself does not matter at all. . . . [The people around the president] are deciding the question of who they themselves will be after Putin. That is the main motive behind this fight: It is a struggle for a place in the system after Putin is gone.⁶

Tension among the different clans is already heated just below the surface; sometimes it boils over. Some clans, like the one centered on Medvedev, have declined in influence in recent years. Many of the members of this group worked in government when Medvedev was president and prime minister, and some continue to serve today. They are associated in the minds of many with a more pro-Western orientation, which has become increasingly out of favor, particularly since the Bolotnaya Square demonstrations in 2011 and the Russian attacks on Ukraine.

In recent years, several of Medvedev’s associates have been targeted for arrest. A number of commentators have

speculated that these arrests were part of an attempt by the security services to diminish Medvedev and represented the opening rounds of the battle for succession in Russia. In November 2016, former Minister of Economy Alexey Ulyukayev was caught in a sting operation involving another clan leader, Rosneft Chief Igor Sechin. On December 15, 2017, Ulyukayev was convicted of bribery on questionable evidence and sentenced to eight years in jail.⁷ In March 2019, another former minister and Medvedev associate, Mikhail Abyzov, was arrested on charges of embezzlement.⁸

As Putin makes decisions on the political transition, elites will be forced to rebalance power and influence as they position themselves for a post-Putin era.⁹ In addition, the age and nature of the Russian ruling class is changing. As Putin's generation of leaders yields power to younger officials, many of them technocrats with little or no personal memory of the Soviet Union or even the Boris Yeltsin years, Russian policy could also change. Some analysts believe that Putin is consciously working to substitute a new generation, "Putin's children," for the old guard that has supported him during his 20-year rule.¹⁰

It is difficult to ascertain precisely *how* policy will change at this point, as many younger potential leaders are keeping their heads down. In private conversations, younger Russian officials often differ from the hard line epitomized by the former KGB and Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) agents around Putin, who have made the a primary goal of restoring of Russia as a great power controlling its neighbors. Some see a need to take steps to reopen Russia's relations with the West and a need to relax the firm authoritarianism embodied in Putinism. Others want to reduce central economic control. They want to

increase investment, encourage more entrepreneurship, and develop industries that will reduce Russia's reliance on export of natural resources. One thing is clear: Whoever succeeds Putin will have to garner the support of many of the most influential clans, including their younger members, or preempt them to achieve and hold power.

Role of the *Siloviki* and the Security Services

Historically there have been no more-intense clan struggles than those between different elements of the *siloviki*. The "wars" within the *siloviki* go back many years.¹¹ In October 2007, longtime Federal Security Service (FSB; the successor agency to the KGB) officer and head of the Federal Drug Service Viktor Cherkesov engaged in a bitter battle with the aforementioned Igor Sechin, now the chief executive officer of Rosneft, but also a longtime intelligence operative and close associate of Putin. The fight eventually led to then-President Medvedev relieving Cherkesov of his duties on May 12, 2008.

One of Cherkesov's 2007 allies, Viktor Zolotov, was then head of the Presidential Security Service. In 2013, Zolotov was appointed deputy minister of interior; in April 2016, Putin named him as the head of the newly created National Guard of Russia. Zolotov now has an estimated 340,000 police and paramilitary officers in 84 units under his direction.¹² Many analysts saw this move as a clear effort by Putin to set up a security network to compete with the network run by the FSB. Zolotov and these internal troops report directly to the president and are independent of the intelligence services and the armed forces. Clearly, they have the power to play a major role in any succession.

In the past two years, Zolotov has continued his behind-the-scenes battles with the leaders of the other FSB

clan.¹³ Chief among them are Nikolai Patrushev, formerly the head of the FSB, who has been the head of the Russian Security Council since 2008, and Aleksandr Bortnikov, the head of the FSB since 2008. Along with former Head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov, they are all key members of Putin's inner circle, particularly on issues relating to Russian security. Some see them as competitors to Putin, however, as well as archrivals to Zolotov, but it is hard to be certain, given the veil of secrecy that Putin insists on for the secret services. Other career members of the security services, as well as more-recent members of Putin's personal security detail, have taken civil positions during Putin's tenure, including ministries and governorships.

The younger members of the intelligence and security services are an unknown factor in any succession. Members of this younger generation are rumored to want the old-timers to move aside, as they want power and their own "piece of the pie"; however, they are worried that—because of decreasing energy profits, sanctions, and an aging old guard—that pie has been getting steadily smaller.

The Economic Challenge

Russia has been mired in relative economic stagnation since the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. This stagnation is caused by the lack of structural economic and rule-of-law reforms that are so important to investors. Geopolitical strains with the West—especially Western sanctions over Ukraine, election interference, and persistent high levels of corruption—have also harmed the climate for investment. Russia survived a nearly 2.8-percent decline in gross domestic product after the invasion of Ukraine, and it had slowly built its economy back to

limited positive growth,¹⁴ but the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic seems likely to lead to a 5–10 percent decline in growth. The careful fiscal and macroeconomic policies of Central Bank President Elvira Nabiullina and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anton Siluanov have been critical to past efforts and will be vital in the future. Fortunately, Russia maintains large cash reserves (currently around \$560 billion) to face any serious economic crises.

Russian and Western analysts alike follow closely the views of Alexey Kudrin, Chairman of the Russian Audit Chamber, former finance minister, and confidant of Putin. Even before the pandemic, Kudrin had outlined a very pessimistic outlook for the Russian economy at the 2019 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. He predicted that the Russian economy would not exceed 2-percent growth during the next two years. He cited the outflow of \$40 billion during the first six months of 2019 as a main cause of Russia's economic problems.¹⁵

It is no secret why Russia seems mired in an unending cycle of stagnation. Kudrin has been remarkably consistent in his analysis of the Russian economy and the problems emanating from the lack of change. In a January 13, 2017, presentation to the Gaidar Economic Forum in Moscow, Kudrin said that the old Russian economic model was not working. He told the forum that Russia was facing serious challenges, including the country's demographic problems, the lack of investment, economic sanctions, Russia's distancing from world markets, technological backwardness, low productivity, and poor quality of public administration. He concluded that, "The main problems lie inside Russia, and its main problems are the institutional and structural problems that have accumulated today."¹⁶ At the same conference, Medvedev spoke about the problems

of growing income inequality and uneven development of Russia's regions.

Kudrin struck a similar note in an October 2018 interview, when he said that most of Russia's troubles were self-inflicted, an "issue of domestic institutional, structural reforms." He also predicted, however, that there were international implications.¹⁷ He argued that, absent policy changes, the relationship with the United States will not improve for five years; improvement can only happen under different leadership in Russia and the United States. Kudrin seems to believe that Russia will not succeed in improving its economy without improving relations with the United States. In his view, a rapprochement is critical if Russia is to obtain necessary investment and build a more diversified economy.

The Russian downturn has been negatively affecting the lives of ordinary Russians for many years. Real disposable income has dropped 7.3 percent below the pre-2014 level, although incomes rose 0.8 percent in 2019.¹⁸ Some believe that the actual decline is much higher, from 11 to 14 percent. Russians' spending power also has declined because of the government's decision to increase the standard value-added tax rate from 18 percent to 20 percent on January 1, 2019.¹⁹ Putin recognized these economic problems in his January 2020 state-of-the-nation address and called on the government to increase incomes. He blamed low productivity as a key factor, but he has not put political energy behind the structural reforms needed to spur growth. Now, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic will make the problem even more acute.²⁰

Questions about the longer-term effect on Russia's future are growing, especially under the current circumstances of pandemic. For decades, Russia has relied on its

rich reserves of oil, gas, gold, diamonds, and other natural resources, but prices for these resources have plummeted, and it is unclear if or when they will recover. Despite numerous efforts, Russia has not been able to develop an industrial base that can make products (other than nuclear reactors and weapons) that are competitive in international markets. What does the future hold for a country that continues to be so reliant on the energy sector of the market? How can it claim to be a great power and compete with the United States and China if its economy ranks only 11th or 12th in the world?

Public Dissatisfaction

Putin and his supporters can rule Russia, but they will ultimately do so only with the support or acquiescence of the Russian people. Many analysts have written about Putin's unofficial social contract with the Russian people. In essence, the original bargain struck between Putin and ordinary Russians after he became president in 2000 was "you leave politics to me and work, and I promise you stability and a better economic life."²¹ Until the financial crisis of 2008, Putin was able to deliver an average of 7-percent growth (largely because of high oil and gas prices). But in 2008, the world was rocked by financial crisis. The price of oil declined, and, for more than a decade, Russia has coped with successive economic setbacks.

Not surprisingly, economic stagnation has produced rising levels of public dissatisfaction with Putin and his governance.²² Polls reflect this decline, with Putin's personal popularity falling from 84 percent after the 2014 Crimean invasion to below 60 percent at the time of this writing. According to the Levada polling organization, trust in Putin among the Russian people has fallen as well.

Polls also show that growing public outrage over corruption has contributed substantially to discontent in the country. In his January 2020 state-of-the-nation address, Putin said that, “Our society is clearly demonstrating a demand for change.”²³ With parliamentary elections scheduled for 2021 and his United Russia Party widely reviled, Putin seems to have signaled that changes must occur to build public support for his government’s efforts.

No single issue in recent years has proved more controversial than the decision to raise the pension age by five years—from 55 to 60 for women and from 60 to 65 for men. Putin had little choice. The State Pension Fund was running out of money, and Putin did not want to divert resources from other needs. The rise of the pension age will hit the poorer elderly particularly hard. Russia’s poverty rate is officially at around 13 percent, but a 2018 report by the Russian Presidential Academy of the National Economy and Public Administration found that 22 percent of the population fell into what the report defined as the “poverty zone,” with incomes that allowed them to buy only food and basic staples. The study found that 36 percent of Russians were in the “consumer risk zone,” with incomes that permitted them to buy decent food and clothes but left little or no disposable income.²⁴ Before the COVID-19 epidemic, Putin had promised to cut Russia’s poverty level in half by 2024. Kudrin recently stated that the country risks a “social explosion” because of falling living standards and widespread poverty.²⁵ There is some suggestion from Ministry of Finance budget projections that spending on domestic social needs will increase in coming years while defense and national security spending remain relatively constant, but that remains to be seen.²⁶

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Few channels exist for the Russian public to express its dissatisfaction over policy. The internet, journalistic investigations and editorials, and (to a limited extent) the ballot box can demonstrate public dissatisfaction. Most often, grassroots public anger over social and political issues manifests in public demonstrations. During 2019, the number of demonstrations increased substantially; demonstrations reportedly occurred in all but one Russian *oblast*. Demonstrations focused on a variety of issues, including the following:

- increases in the pension eligibility age and corruption; some of these protests were organized by Alexi Navalny and his colleagues throughout the country

- local issues, such as a 2019 protest in Yekaterinburg to stop the construction of another Orthodox church in one of the few remaining public parks in the city center
- environmental issues, as with protests in Arkhangelsk over using a local landfill site to dump Moscow's garbage
- a lack of opportunities for political participation, such as the August 2019 demonstrations in Moscow that occurred when opposition candidates were banned from standing for election to the Moscow City Council.

Russians also expressed their dissatisfaction through the defeat of several Kremlin-selected candidates in gubernatorial runoff elections in Khabarovsk and Vladimir in 2018.²⁷ The unjustified June 2019 arrest of Meduza investigative journalist Ivan Golunov caused a backlash in the media. Journalistic outrage and public support for reversing the arrest became so strong that the authorities stepped in to release Golunov and suspend the policemen who arranged his arrest.

Notwithstanding those manifestations of public frustration, in interviews with focus groups of Muscovites, participants stated that the average Russian has barely begun to think about Putin's successor in 2024 and doubts that he or she will have a say in the selection of Russia's next leader.²⁸

Other Important Factors

Although the four issues just described are likely to have the greatest effect on how the succession plays out, other factors, including relationships among key stakeholders

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Tension Between Stability and Uncertainty

History teaches potential Russian leaders that the first rule of any succession in Russia must be predictability and stability. Keeping Russia stable, avoiding political surprises, and opposing so-called "color revolutions" at home and abroad are all hallmarks of Putinism. During his third and fourth terms, Putin has steadily increased state control in all aspects of Russian life. More than 50 percent of the economy is still in the hands of the Russian state. As the time for transition approaches, keeping Russia stable will undoubtedly only increase in importance for Putin and the Russian elites who do not wish to lose their place in society, their wealth, and their influence.

Throughout his fourth term, Putin and his lieutenants have consistently sought to undercut opponents, denying them access to television and cracking down hard against public demonstrations. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny

and his closest aides have been repeatedly arrested and jailed for mounting unsanctioned demonstrations. As Putin has increased control and further recentralized economic decisionmaking, the economy has stagnated, and Putin and his team have done everything necessary to maintain or enhance their own economic positions. Competition among the elites for economic advantage could roil any potential transition to a new Russian leader.

Despite the value placed on stability and predictability, one of the paradoxes of contemporary Russia is that, while the constitution is quite clear about how to achieve a stable political transition, there is no certainty about how to implement the constitution's provisions even after the probable amendments; everything is still reliant on Putin. In many ways, Russia's failure to develop a fair and predictable system that provides a clear and reliable transition of power is one of the country's greatest weaknesses. In a commentary written before the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian analyst Tatyana Stanovaya described the uncertainty inherent in the succession process and its effects on current Russian politics:

The Russian regime is less and less like a well-tuned orchestra with a confident conductor, and more and more like a cacophony in which every musician is trying to play louder and get more attention than everyone else. No one is focusing on the harmonious sound of the symphony. Instead, institutional and corporate priorities take precedence over national priorities, and are carried out at the latter's expense. This political divergence has been provoked by Putin's political absence and fueled by a general fear of an uncertain future and lack of clarity regarding Putin's plans.²⁹

Dissatisfaction Among Youth

Dissatisfaction is particularly noticeable among educated young people. In recent years, more and more young Russians have joined demonstrations around the country. This has led Putin and his team to redouble their efforts to reach out to young people.³⁰ Poll after poll shows the contradictions in the attitudes of Russian youth.³¹ They are patriotic and want to live in a strong Russia; at the same time, they see Western nations and lifestyles as models. Many say that they see an uncertain future in Russia. They worry about the economy and living in a country where they see little chance of meaningful change. They still watch television but increasingly get their information from media sites on the internet. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the role of Russian young people in future elections and the governance of the nation.

One of the clear results of growing dissatisfaction of educated young people has been rising emigration rates—a pronounced “brain drain.” A February 2019 study by the Atlantic Council estimated that, since Putin first became president, between 1.6 million and 2 million Russians—out of a total population of 145 million—have left for Western democracies.³² The Atlantic Council study states that this emigration sped up with Putin's return as president in 2012, followed by a weakening economy and growing repressions. A Levada Center study the same month found that the number of young people who want to live abroad stands at 41 percent and is growing. In May 2017, 32 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed stated a desire to live abroad.

Demographic and Health Care Challenges

Russia also continues to face serious demographic and health care challenges. In his January 2020 state-of-the

nation address, Putin made extended remarks on the nation's population decline—a trend he said that his administration had a “historic duty” to reverse.³³ While the Putin administration has taken steps to deal with some problems, the situation remains serious. In the early 1990s, Russia had a population of roughly 148 million people; today, it has approximately 143 million (not including Crimea). In 2018, the United Nations predicted that Russia's population will fall to 132 million by 2050.³⁴ This kind of decline could have a serious effect on the labor market and on the pool of young recruits for the military.

The reasons for the historical decline of 700,000 to 800,000 per year are well known: increasing deaths in an aging population, a low birth rate, a high rate of abortions, increasing emigration, and a low level of immigration.³⁵ The Putin administration has been making well-publicized efforts to halt the decline in population, with some success. In addition, Putin has been trying to improve Russia's health care system, which is a frequent source of complaint, but the quality of health care in Russia remains bad, particularly in rural areas. Russia will have extreme difficulty maintaining its claim to be a great power if it cannot reverse population decline and improve its health care system.

Nationalism in Russia and the Near Abroad

One of the core issues that has emerged during Putin's third and fourth terms has been the collision of competing nationalisms in Russia and neighboring states. The annexation of Crimea and the fighting in the Donbas are perhaps the best examples of the conflict between Russian desires to reclaim a Soviet-style sphere of influence and the rising nationalism and self-assertiveness of nations on Russia's periphery.

For Putin, harnessing modern Russian nationalism has been a political boon. After the Crimean invasion, Putin's popularity soared. To a lesser extent, Russia's military actions in Syria helped burnish Putin's reputation as a leader willing to reassert Russia's role as a great power in the world. As the economic cost of the wars and Western sanctions over Ukraine hit Russian's pocketbooks, the nationalistic appeal has somewhat abated.

Ukraine, however, is only one of the flashpoints. Georgia has been at the forefront since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Strong anti-Russian sentiments boiled over in June 2018, when street demonstrations erupted in Tbilisi after a Russian politician was permitted to sit in the parliamentary speaker's chair during a conference on Orthodoxy. More-nascent expressions of nationalist sentiment have been mounted in other neighboring countries, such as Armenia and Central Asian regions that were once part of the Soviet Union.

The sheer volatility and unpredictability of nationalist issues at home and abroad represent a true wild card in any potential Russian succession process. The fundamental and long-sought quest for a Russian national identity, particularly in the post-Soviet world, remains in some ways as elusive as ever. In neighboring states, nationalism has often turned sharply anti-Russian, as in Ukraine and Georgia. The Russian official reaction, not unlike the old colonial metropole, has been to “punish” Georgia by cutting off airplane flights and urging tourists not to visit the country. Similar Russian economic punishments have not worked in the past, but they seem to be a knee-jerk reaction to dealing with what are perceived as insolent border states. A new Russian leader could continue this policy of “imperial control” or could attempt to forge a more peaceful relationship

between Russia and its near abroad. This will be a critical policy issue, and it could also become a question in any competition to become Putin's successor.

Stakeholder Dynamics

An analysis of the dynamics that will matter during a transition requires consideration of the many entities expected to be involved and the issues motivating these stakeholder groups.

The Oligarchs

Exerting control over the oligarchs was one of Putin's most critical steps in solidifying his hold on power after he took over from Yeltsin. Having gained massive economic and political influence during the Yeltsin period, the oligarchs were put in their place by the new Russian president, who cut them down politically and seized their assets. He forced ambitious oligarchs, such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, into exile and took over their media empires. Putin made an example of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who dared to challenge Putin's power. Others, such as Oleg Deripaska, Vladimir Potanin, Vladimir Lisin, and Alexei Mordashev, accommodated themselves to Putin. They retained their money and position under Putin's rule and supported Putin's policies, bankrolling the construction of the Olympic Stadium and facilities for the 2014 Olympics in Sochi.³⁶ In addition, some of these men carried out specific tasks for Putin, such as promoting Kremlin policies in foreign nations (which reportedly occurred during the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2015).

A number of oligarchs have expressed quiet dissatisfaction with the Putin economic policy. Many have substantial

business interests—and keep significant sums of money—outside Russia. Oligarchs with an international perspective would undoubtedly favor a more open economic policy toward the West. Whether they would be prepared to exert pressure, individually or collectively, to support a rapprochement with the West (including compromises on key issues, such as with Ukraine) is an important question.

The Military

Whoever succeeds Putin will have to retain the allegiance of the Russian military. Apart from being the guarantor of the nation's security and the embodiment of Russia's ability to project power, Russia's armed forces remain the most popular institution in the country, according to many polls. Their allegiance will be critical in any succession transition. It seems unlikely the military will become directly involved as they were during the August 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, but the armed forces could be called on to exert their influence by throwing support behind a particular candidate, or they could simply state their support for the chosen successor as a means of legitimation. The military's quid pro quo will undoubtedly be a commitment by the new leader to continued high budgets for the Ministry of Defense.

The Opposition

Putin won the March 15, 2018, presidential election with nearly 77 percent of the vote. He was followed by Pavel Grudinin of the Communist party, with 11.77 percent, and the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, with 5.65 percent. Others, such as moderates Ksenia Sobchak, Boris Titov, and Grigory Yavlinsky, were on the ballot, but each garnered less than 2 percent. Significantly, Navalny sought

to run, but was ruled ineligible by the Central Election Commission because of a previous criminal conviction. The European Court of Human Rights determined that Navalny's rights were violated, but a local court upheld his conviction. The final report of expert monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that restrictions on fundamental freedoms, as well as on candidate registration, have limited the space for political engagement and resulted in a lack of genuine competition.³⁷

Navalny and his followers have been outspoken critics of corruption in the Putin administration for years. Navalny has produced internet videos and organized demonstrations all over Russia attacking this official corruption and promoting reforms. (It is a staple of the Moscow rumor mill that Navalny is secretly funded by elements within the FSB.) In 2013, Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow and surprised pollsters by garnering more than 27 percent of the vote. The election was won by Sergei Sobyenin with 51 percent. Navalny's success in winning such a large part of the Moscow vote has led the Putin team to energetically try to undermine Navalny's opposition to the regime during the president's third and fourth terms. The police have repeatedly arrested Navalny and other opposition leaders along with many who participate in "unauthorized demonstrations." Most recently, opposition political candidates were not permitted on the ballot for City Council elections, which led to large weekly demonstrations on Moscow streets in August 2019, which were countered by violent police action.

The Putin administration has permitted Gennady Zyuganov's Communist Party and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party to run in elections, undoubtedly

recognizing that (in their current forms) they do not pose a threat to being elected and ruling. The Communists have, however, shown themselves more capable of winning in regional elections. In the 2018 regional elections, the Communist candidates for governorships won in two regions and challenged the ruling United Russia candidate in several others. The Communists are making a serious effort to attract younger leaders who could garner more support than the older generation of Zyuganov.

Another open question is whether the opposition is allowed to run candidates in a future presidential election, be they from the right, center, or left. It seems extremely doubtful that Putin will allow an election of a chosen new leader to be disrupted, let alone won, by someone not from the core elites. There is little evidence to suggest that the observance of fundamental freedoms, which the OSCE found lacking in the last election, will be observed with stronger rigor in a new election.

The Media

Putin's control over the media has been instrumental in maintaining political control in Russia. The 2019 Freedom House Report on Russia states:

Although the constitution provides for freedom of speech, vague laws on extremism grant the authorities great discretion to crack down on any speech, organization, or activity that lacks official support. The government controls, directly or through state-owned companies and friendly business magnates, all of the national television networks and many radio and print outlets, as well as most of the media advertising market. A handful of independent outlets still operate, most of them online and some headquartered abroad.³⁸

As Russia approaches a succession leading to the installation of a new leader, control of the media will remain essential for Putin. Television still provides average Russians with their main information on Russian government and society. Greater reliance on the internet, however, has been growing, particularly among young people. Not surprisingly, the government has passed laws giving the authorities a larger and larger role in controlling the internet. This culminated on May 1, 2019, when Putin signed a new law giving the government the authority to control all internet traffic and to set up an alternative system, should the political authorities decide to detach Russia from the international internet.³⁹ This “sovereign internet law” went into effect on November 1, 2019. It gives the government a critical tool to use in the event of any serious challenge to the succession to Putin. At the same time, control of the media will be important in helping solidify popular and elite support for the new Russian leader.

Regional Leaders

After the Soviet Union dissolved and during much of Yeltsin’s terms as president, a constant fear in Russia and the West was that Russia itself might disintegrate. The wars in Chechnya tore at the fabric of the nation and society, and regional problems were a daily occurrence. Putin made strengthening the nation a primary goal. When he leaves the scene, regional politicians might attempt to increase their power and influence. Chechnya’s Ramzan Kadyrov is of particular interest; he might use his paramilitary army—estimated in size from 5,000 to 20,000 men—to try to obtain greater autonomy in the North Caucasus, and he might try to increase his leverage on the government in Moscow through support for a particular candidate. Other

regional leaders also might try to increase their power. In addition, the Russian government must work with other parts of the growing Muslim community, particularly in such key regions as Kazan.

The Orthodox Church

Under Putin, the Orthodox Church of Russia has expanded steadily in power and influence. By allying itself with the Kremlin and the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) movement, the Orthodox Church has linked itself to Russian nationalism. Polls show that roughly 80 percent of Russians identify as Orthodox and see Orthodoxy as a key identifying characteristic of being Russian in the 21st century (although the number of Russians who actually practice their beliefs is reportedly not large). Putin and key members of his team attend religious ceremonies on major holidays and regularly pay their respects to Patriarch Kirill and the Orthodox Church; outside of religious holidays, they highlight their religious gestures in public ceremonies. For example, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has taken to making the sign of the cross during the May 9 parade honoring the end of the “Great Patriotic War.” In almost any succession scenario, this linkage between Orthodoxy and the Russian national idea will give the church substantial scope to influence public attitudes and debate about a new leader.

Russia’s Relationship with China

One foreign policy issue merits special mention when considering a post-Putin Russia. Russia’s rapprochement with China has become one of Putin’s hallmark foreign policies. He has found considerable common ground with his fellow autocrat, President Xi Jinping, on foreign policy and on governing styles. Economic relations have grown, and Russian

and Chinese military forces have participated in exercises together. This is a far cry from the 1969 military confrontations along the Amur River in the Russian Far East.

However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many in the Russian elite were wary of any closer alliance with China. They fear Chinese inroads into the nations of Central Asia, which Russia perceives as its sphere of influence. There are even deeper fears about long-term Chinese designs on the Russian Far East (a region that has seen its Russian population decline by 20 percent since 1991) and about Putin's willingness to sell Russian high-tech weapons to China, such as the S-400 missile system. Given Russia's economic weakness, Russians worry that, in a closer alliance with China, Russia is destined to become a decidedly junior partner.

Of all the Russia-related foreign policy issues that a U.S. administration will have to confront with a new Russian leader, the Chinese connection may be the most difficult. A continued Russo-Chinese rapprochement in political, economic, and military spheres will present any U.S. administration with new geopolitical challenges.

How Will the Putin Era End?

The world was surprised in 1999 when Yeltsin decided to resign as president and selected Putin as his successor. The new constitutional amendments that the Duma has adopted will give Putin greater time and flexibility to choose the succession process and his likely successor, but there is still uncertainty as to how that will occur. As Putin contemplates the end of his rule, he will have to consider how to ensure his legacy by deciding who and how his policies will continue after he leaves. As has been discussed, he

will have to try to manage competition among key Russian political clans. A quick reversal of Putinism seems unlikely at this point, but fundamental questions about the economy, Russia's engagement with its neighbors, and relations with the West will eventually have to be reexamined. Whether this will be done in an orderly way or as part of a broader battle for political power is impossible to predict at this point.

Several possible scenarios exist through which the succession to the Russian presidency might occur—and several scenarios exist in which Putin maintains his power. These scenarios are summarized in Table 2.

Putin Decides to Stay in Power

With the approval of the 2020 constitutional amendments, Putin can simply continue as president, running again in 2024 and perhaps in 2030. Alternatively, he still has a number of other choices, particularly as he ages. Some anticipate Putin carving out a role as something of a “super president,” or a “father of the nation,” perhaps in the style of Nazarbayev. In March 2019, Nazarbayev selected Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as his successor—while retaining power as the head of Kazakhstan's Security Council and as the leader of the governing party. Tokayev was subsequently elected president with 70 percent of the vote; the result was declared unfair by OSCE and greeted by significant, widespread political protest and mass arrests. Should Putin choose a similar option, this would allow him in theory to maintain political control while giving up the title (and much of the daily work) of president. It could also spark public unrest.

TABLE 2.
Possible Future Scenarios

Putin Decides to Stay in Power After 2024	Putin Leaves
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Kick himself upstairs” a la former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev • Become chairman of an all-powerful State Council • Incorporate Belarus into a larger Russian Federation and become president of the new federation • Repeat 2007; Putin makes the prime minister or another figure the president and becomes prime minister himself • Revise the constitution to create a parliamentary system, with himself as prime minister 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anoint a successor (just as Yeltsin appointed Putin) • Hold a more-or-less free election • Incapacitation; prime minister becomes acting president and then runs for a full term • Removal from office

Another variant of this “moving upstairs” scenario could occur if Belarus were incorporated into a larger Russian Federation. The 1999 Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus provides an outline as to how such a union could occur. It envisages a common head of state, legislature, flag, constitution, army citizenship, and currency. However, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has repeatedly put off any final decision.⁴⁰ Differences have only grown in 2020 over energy and other issues. However, should a Russian-Belarusian federation be created, Putin could become overall president or the de facto leader of both nations; a less-powerful president of Russia could oversee day-to-day governance of Russia, under Putin’s overall authority.

By increasing the power of the Russian State Council, an advisory body that Putin created in 2000 (based on similar Russian imperial and Communist bodies), Putin could use his chairmanship to rule from above, while delegating day-to-day responsibilities to a new Russian president and a more powerful prime minister.⁴¹

Although it now seems highly improbable, Putin could revert to the stratagem he devised in 2007, permitting Mishustin (or some other candidate) to become president and again taking the position of prime minister for himself. Mishustin would now seem to be an unlikely candidate for president in this situation.

Another unlikely possibility, mentioned before Putin’s constitutional amendments were proposed, would have Russia move more in the direction of a parliamentary system. This concept was proposed by Volodin, who is now chairman of the Duma.⁴² This system would give the prime minister sweeping power (and presumably make the president more of a figurehead).

Putin Gives Up the Presidency

There are several possibilities, however unlikely, in which Putin would leave the presidency and not seek a way to maintain power. He could change course abruptly again, or health issues could force a new decision. Putin could

simply anoint a successor who would run for president in a new election—the outcome of which would be preordained. This managed transition would be, in essence, a repeat of the procedure followed during Putin’s own selection by Yeltsin. Presumably, the new president would reach certain understandings about protecting Putin’s security, family, and wealth, as Yeltsin did before he selected Putin. If Putin chooses this course, he will wait to pick his successor until the actual transition is very close, lest his preferred candidate becomes a public target for his opponents and Putin himself becomes a “lame duck.” The new candidate could be a member of the *siloviki* or a politician, technocrat, or security official whom Putin has brought into power through a governorship or federal government post. Among the names frequently mentioned in the press and in polls as possible presidential candidates are Shoigu, Sobyanin, and Putin’s former chief of security, Tula Governor Alexey Dyumin.

A highly improbable scenario—at least given today’s realities—would be a more-or-less free election in which multiple candidates would be permitted to contest the future leadership and direction of the country. In the words of Olga Kryshtanovskaya: “In our system there are always elections, but the real choice is made by a small group of people, not 140 million.”⁴³ Another highly unlikely scenario would be a de facto sharing of power among a group of leaders controlling different power centers in Russia.

Should Putin pass away suddenly or resign, the Russian constitution calls for the prime minister to become acting president for 90 days while new elections for a new president are organized. This would give Mishustin (or whoever occupied the position at the time) a clear advantage to succeed Putin, since that person would control the levers

of power at least for the three months before an election. Whether other members of the Russian elite would accept such an outcome remains to be seen.

Finally, there is always the possibility of Putin’s removal by force or pressure and his replacement by the leader of a new faction. The coup scenario has deep roots in Russian history but would appear unlikely today, given Putin’s overarching power.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Key Questions

Any of the scenarios listed above will have implications for U.S. foreign policy. If Putin decides to stay in power, the United States and Europe will likely have to continue to contend with the kinds of policies that have led to serious geopolitical competition with Putin’s Russia. They include the following:

- undermining western security architecture and an open assault on the western liberal system created after World War II
- Russian military rearmament, ranging from hypersonic weapons and newer nuclear weapons to new conventional weapons and tactics that Russia has used in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere
- Russian use of cyberweapons and social media to try to undercut Western elections and damage political stability in the United States and Europe
- a growing rapprochement between Russia and China, driven by the personal ties between Putin and Xi Jinping

- a more aggressive policy toward former Soviet Union states in an effort to reclaim a broad sphere of influence and control.

Russia's continued determination to reclaim its great-power status will likely confront the West with challenges in the rule of any successor. As I have attempted to show in this Perspective, the extent to which Russia's economic weakness will temper any new Russian leader's desire to replicate Putin's policies remains a key question.

Whenever the Russian succession takes place, foreign powers will likely have little direct effect. The United States will not be an exception. It could, however, become a political foil for Putin's successor, as it did during Putin's reelection run in 2012. The United States in general, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and then-Ambassador Michael McFaul became frequent political targets of the Kremlin and were used to muster support for Putin. Obama administration criticism of Russia's parliamentary election in 2011, support for so-called "color revolutions" during the Arab Spring and in Russia's near abroad, and support for Russian opposition efforts to seek democratic rights and freedoms at home were all used by the Russian media to frighten the public. In his memoir, McFaul writes that Putin aide Vladislav Surkov told him that his arrival as ambassador in January 2012 was "like manna from heaven for the Putin election effort."⁴⁴ Surkov claimed that the use of anti-U.S. propaganda helped the Putin campaign pick up several percentage points of support.

In that context, how should U.S. and European policymakers begin thinking about preparations for the possible succession of a new Russian leader following Putin? Obviously, we cannot know whether the U.S.-Russian relationship will improve over the next few years or remain

in the current stagnant state as the succession approaches. U.S. and European officials must, however, be prepared for a variety of contingency scenarios. This must involve plans on how to deal with whoever is the new Russian leader and how to try to affect Russian policy after the new president comes to power. That will not be easy. The difficulty will be compounded by the often secretive, byzantine character of Russian politics.

Among the key questions that Western policymakers will have to monitor and address will be the following:

- What kind of policy debate will follow the installation of a new leader in the Kremlin? Will there be pressure from within the elites or the public for change? Will the new leader take the initiative?
- Will there be a heated debate over the future of Russia? Or will there perhaps be a quieter internal debate over the economy or Russia's relationship with the West?
- If the situation in Ukraine is still at a standstill, will the new leader seek to bring an end to the conflict with the hope of getting sanctions lifted and launching better relations with the West? Or will the new leader double down and try to force Ukraine to accommodate Russian demands in eastern Ukraine?
- Will a crisis in a neighboring country or a serious terrorist attack unexpectedly play a role in the succession process?
- What will be the impact of younger officials? Will their view of the nation be different from the current generation of leaders? Will their concept of Russian identity resemble the hard line epitomized by the former KGB agents around Putin or will they see a need to take steps to reopen Russia's relations

with the West? How will they view relations with the United States?

- Will post-Putin officials see the firm authoritarianism embodied in Putinism as the key to the future, or will they open up Russia again to less-central control? Will they recognize that key economic reforms are necessary to reverse Russia's economic decline? Will they work to reduce the state role in the economy, provide a genuine judicial process to arbitrate disagreements, take steps to increase investment, encourage entrepreneurship, and develop industries that will reduce Russia's reliance on export of natural resources?

All these questions will need to be addressed and continuously reevaluated as any Russian transition process moves forward.

How Have Previous Successions Played Out?

The United States should consult closely with its European allies to plan for the potentialities of any form of succession process. In advance of the transition, the U.S. government should also commission a careful internal study of how previous administrations have handled Soviet and Russian successions. This study should be constantly updated in case the succession occurs before the planned 2024 election.

It will be particularly instructive to look at the Gorbachev-Yeltsin transition, as well as the Yeltsin-Putin transition, to examine the most successful (and unsuccessful) steps adopted by the Reagan and Bush administrations.

The Chernenko-Gorbachev Transition

When General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko died on March 10, 1985, the Reagan administration dispatched Vice President George Bush to attend the funeral. This was Bush's third such "funeral trip" to Moscow, having previously attended the Brezhnev and Andropov funerals. President Ronald Reagan had received conflicting advice from his advisers and the Intelligence Community on the prospects of dealing with the new General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev. Analysts were divided on the question of whether Gorbachev would be a reformer or simply continue the policies of his mentor, former General Secretary Yuri Andropov. Significantly, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had received Gorbachev at her official residence at Chequers the previous December, and she had told Reagan that she thought the West could work with Gorbachev.

Reagan wanted to improve relations with the Soviet Union and decided to send a positive signal. Bush gave Gorbachev a letter from Reagan, which offered an early summit meeting. After an 85-minute meeting with Gorbachev, Bush made the U.S. position quite clear in an upbeat news conference, saying that Reagan was prepared for a summit meeting "as soon as the Soviet leadership is ready." Characterizing the meeting with Gorbachev, Bush said:

If there ever was a time when we can move forward with progress in the last few years, I would say this is a good time for that. . . . Our aspirations for that are high. We are not euphoric. We are realistic We encountered nothing to discourage us in any way. We are high on hope, high that we can make progress in Geneva, high for an overall reduction of tensions.

The frankness and the usefulness and the content of the meeting were such that we have every reason to be encouraged.⁴⁵

The U.S. and Russian leaders eventually met on November 19 at a summit in Geneva, and a fairly tough exchange occurred. But the door had been opened and other meetings ensued, with results that are now well known.

The Yeltsin-Putin Transition

The transition from Yeltsin to Putin was a longer process. Instead of a funeral, there was an election process, which took time to complete. On August 9, 1999, Putin was named acting prime minister of Russia. On December 31, Yeltsin resigned, and Putin became acting president of Russia. According to the Russian Constitution, this precipitated a new presidential election, which happened on March 26, 2000, and which Putin won with 53 percent of the vote.

Yeltsin had developed a close personal relationship with President Bill Clinton and tried to reassure a worried Clinton in phone calls and at a personal meeting in Istanbul in October 1999 that his hand-picked successor was a “solid man,” a democrat, and a good partner with the West.⁴⁶ Clinton made his final trip to Moscow as president in June 2000 for meetings and dinner with the new Russian president.⁴⁷ In addition to not being able to narrow differences over a missile defense system that the United States intended to build, Clinton and his team came away worried about the views of the new Russian president. Clinton also met during his visit with the then-retired Yeltsin. According to former Deputy Secretary of State

Strobe Talbott, Clinton told the former president that “I am a little worried about this young man that you have turned over the presidency to. He doesn’t have democracy in his heart.”⁴⁸

After his election as president, George W. Bush scheduled an early meeting with Putin in Slovenia on June 16, 2001. Putin was in a more accommodating mood. Both sides came away from the meeting pleased with the first encounter. This was the meeting where Bush told a press conference that “I looked the man in the eye. I found him very straightforward and trustworthy—I was able to get a sense of his soul.”

Bush’s national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, later admitted this statement was a serious mistake, with many people believing that it implied that Bush had naively trusted Putin.⁴⁹ Bush recognized this himself when he told Maria Bartiromo on Fox Business News on April 18, 2018:

When I looked into his eyes and saw his soul, Russia was broke. I mean, short-term broke. And ah, the price of oil goes up and Putin changed Look, he’s a very smart tactician. The problem is, his whole attitude on most issues is “I’m going to win and U.S. is going to lose” He is a very aggressive person who wants to reinstate Soviet influence even though the Soviet [Union] no longer exists and therefore, I always felt it was always very important for the United States to be very forceful in dealing with Putin. Not belligerent, but forceful.⁵⁰

Putin was the first foreign leader to call and express condolences to Bush after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and he permitted the United States to move military equipment through Russia

(via the Northern Distribution Network) to combat the terrorist threat in Afghanistan. In November 2001, Bush hosted Putin for a summit at his ranch in Texas. The public events showed two leaders enjoying each other's company, but the substantive discussions were tough, particularly over whether to continue to follow the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.⁵¹ One month later, the White House officially informed Russia of its intention to withdraw from the treaty. The decision became effective in June 2002. It led Putin to announce that Russia would increase its own nuclear capabilities to counter the U.S. move.⁵²

The Bush-Putin relationship got off to a good start on a personal basis, but differences over key issues quickly surfaced and showed the underlying strategic disagreements between the two countries. On March 20, 2003, the United States launched its military incursion into Iraq and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. Those events seem to have convinced Putin that the United States would stop at nothing, including overthrowing serving leaders, to impose its views on the world. In Putin's mind, Russia could be a part of that world—but not an equal partner, as he wished. Those views became core grievances that Putin has continued to articulate to this day.

The Putin-Medvedev-Putin Transitions

The transition from Putin to Medvedev as president in May 2008 was not really a succession. It was an accommodation to satisfy the legal requirement that no president serve more than two consecutive terms. Medvedev assumed all the responsibilities as president and had some latitude to make decisions. Putin, serving as prime minister, still held the real power. This became clear on key occasions during

Medvedev's term of office. It was reinforced when Putin decided to run again as president in 2012, and bumped Medvedev down to the prime minister position again.

The Obama administration's attempt to reset U.S.-Russian relations occurred during the Medvedev term. President Barack Obama and Medvedev were able to make progress on several issues—notably, the signing of the New Start Treaty, Russian membership in the World Trade Organization, and cooperation in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. The relationship once again slipped back into a state of higher tension after Putin's third election as president and his clampdown on opposition attempts to increase democracy in Russia. Critics of the Obama “reset policy” have faulted the administration for putting too much emphasis on the relationship with Medvedev and not paying enough attention to Putin, who remained the real power in the country.

General Lessons

What can we conclude from these succession experiences? From observation and experience, I suggest several general lessons, both for understanding the direction that the Russian transition is taking and advancing U.S. policy while the transition occurs and afterward.

Seeking the Best Understanding of the Direction of Transition

Homework is critical. A good analysis of the pluses and minuses of the new leader is essential, as is an assessment of his power and status among the Russian elites. A continuing, careful evaluation of Russian elite attitudes is vital

to determine whether the new Russian president has the latitude and strength at home to act on specific issues.

Size up the new leader's views of the U.S.-Russian relationship. Calculate whether he or she will be ready to try to improve U.S.-Russian relations. Put together a strategy of engagement that reflects U.S. hopes, but also develop contingencies in case events do not go as planned.

Be careful in handling Russian emissaries and the messages they might bring from Moscow. Many could try to steer U.S. attitudes, including through seeking support for potential successors. To the greatest extent possible, stay out of Russian infighting if it materializes.

Advancing U.S. Policy

Personal relationships between presidents are important—but, at the end of the day, core national security interests are even more important.

Send clear and consistent messages about U.S. policy before and during the transition. Signal privately and publicly what can and cannot change. Be clear on U.S. goals.

Be careful with public statements. Do not exaggerate the potential for real change until it starts to happen and do not crow about Western successes in ways that might embarrass or limit the new Russian leader.

Recognize that Russia is still going through a wrenching transition from a Soviet Communist state to a modern nation. It will likely be our adversary and competitor for some time to come. Never lose sight of our long-term goal to build a better, safer relationship, while maintaining adequate deterrence and bolstering the security of our allies.

Be open to change and compromise but resist accommodating Russia without changes on its part. Unilateral concessions with Russia are rarely reciprocated. The new Russian leader will undoubtedly be advised to tap into U.S. goodwill—and pocket whatever he or she can without concessions.

No transition or reset will succeed without a clear understanding of conflicting views, and a willingness to accept that there will be no possibility of compromise on some issues.

Above all, be patient. Any transition in Russia will be unpredictable and take time.

Conclusion

In his superb book, *The Invention of Russia, from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War*, Arkady Ostrovsky, Russia editor of the *Economist* concludes:

Putin has portrayed himself as a gatherer of Russian lands and restorer of the Russian empire. In fact, he is likely to go down in history as its gravedigger . . . Putin offered war as an alternative to modernity and the future. The forces he awakened are the forces not of imperial expansion—Russia does not possess the energy or vision required for empire building—but of revisionism, chaos and war. He may plunge the country into darkness, or Russia may yet rid itself of this postimperial syndrome and emerge as a nation-state.⁵³

However Putin and Russia manage the transition to a new leader, Russia will still face the fundamental questions it has confronted since 1991. Can it build a successful modern nation-state? Can it do so without threatening its

neighbors and European security? Can it become a more cooperative international partner than at present? The evidence to date seems to indicate that Putin himself is not prepared to make the decisions necessary to increase the practice of democracy, to launch the kinds of economic reforms that will lead to more growth and prosperity, or to work more cooperatively with the West.

Whoever eventually emerges from the presidential succession process—however and whenever it occurs—will confront many of the questions raised in this Perspective. This leader might encounter an even more difficult set of

choices than Putin currently confronts, along with internal political challenges that Putin no longer faces.

Similarly, the challenges for the United States and Europe during the next stage of Russia's transition will likely be as difficult as any we have had to face so far. For the U.S. policymaker, the stakes will be high as the U.S. government negotiates the transition to a new leader and perhaps serious policy changes. We cannot rule out more of what has transpired during Putin's rule, but we need to be ready to move forward on areas where our national interests can be served.

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This Perspective provides a framework to guide policymakers in understanding the succession to Russian President Vladimir Putin, in whatever form it takes. The Perspective looks at the key political, economic, and social factors that could have an impact on any Russian succession and the possible role of key Russian stakeholders. It contains a review of a variety of succession scenarios; presents, in broad terms, the history and implications of past Russian presidential successions for the United States; and provides suggestions for successfully managing a Russian transition. This Perspective was largely written before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic but has been updated to reflect the effect of the pandemic so far. Many uncertainties remain.

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