



## We'll Always Have Putin

By Leon Aron

*President George W. Bush said last week of his erstwhile “friend” Vladimir Putin, “I have no idea what he’s going to do.” Bush is not alone: no one but Putin knows whether the Russian president will relinquish power next year. Still, after Putin’s announcement that he would not be averse to becoming the next prime minister, the prevailing guess is that after the March 2 presidential election, Putin will head the Russian government under a new president.*

Yet before the Bush administration and the leading contenders for the White House begin to design a Russia policy based on this, its plausibility has to be examined. In light of what we know about Putin and the political and economic system he has forged, he is more likely to find a way to continue in office as President Putin.

To begin, Putin has done the opposite of what he publicly said he would do with regard to some major policy issues. In November 2003, he declared that “the state should not really seek to destroy” Yukos—at the time Russia’s largest, most modern, and most transparent private company—and then methodically did just that through a palpably fraudulent prosecution.

He has repeatedly averred that Russia needs a robust party system—and then proceeded to make participation in parliamentary elections arduous and subject to unchallenged management by an election commission that is subservient to the Kremlin. No party may even hope to get on the ballot in Russia without the Kremlin’s approval.

The president has extolled democracy in virtually every one of his annual state-of-Russia addresses since 2000—and then canceled the election of regional governors, who are now all

but directly appointed by Moscow. He correctly identified independent mass media as the main weapon against corruption—and then brought practically all nationwide print, radio, and television outlets under the Kremlin’s control.

### “Stepping Down” to Prime Minister

For Putin, taking on the job of prime minister would be not just “stepping down” but wallowing in self-abnegation. The prime ministers under Putin have been appointed by the president and have served at his pleasure. They have been little more than figureheads who cannot even pick their own cabinets. This year, Putin deprived the prime minister of supervision over the so-called state corporations, into which the president’s administration had earlier merged some of Russia’s vital, and often most profitable, industrial enterprises—like missile production and nuclear power.

Of course, with Putin’s party, United Russia, poised to take two-thirds of the seats in parliament, its approval of constitutional amendments emaciating the presidency and fashioning a more powerful “executive” role for the prime minister is assured (as is the constitutionally mandated endorsement of the two-thirds of the regional legislatures now also firmly in the Kremlin’s hand).

Still, while Ukraine has profited from a similar devolution of presidential authority, Russia would

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have to go much further to make the job of prime minister palatable for Putin. In addition to giving the parliament—and not the president—the right to form the government, the prime minister may have to be made commander in chief as well.

## Controlling National Wealth

Yet power in Russia today grows not only from the barrel of a gun, but also from a barrel of oil. And here, too, everything has been done to ensure that the president's administration, not the prime minister's office, be in charge of the daily export of seven million barrels of crude oil and oil products (like fuel oil and diesel fuel). With natural gas, these fuel exports fetched \$190 billion last year.

Never before in Russian history have so few exercised such tight control over a national wealth that is so vast and liquid, in more ways than one. The stakes of relinquishing power have grown commensurately for Putin. If he becomes prime minister, a vast network of informal arrangements that made the president and his entourage the managers of Russia's most lucrative natural resources will have to be dismantled—redirected away from the Kremlin and toward the prime minister.

For a man who declared the demise of the Soviet Union to be “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,” even the most “executive” of prime-ministerships may not be enough. The Russian president is the symbol of the nation, its above-the-fray father. He is now also in complete control of the election and of much of the economy. Putin must consider moving out, like some silly American president vacating the White House, to be downright humiliating—not to mention bad for the country and the people who like him so much.

## Sidestepping a Constitutional Amendment

Staying in the Kremlin without violating the letter of the 1993 constitution (the spirit went out of it several years ago) could be accomplished by Putin in several ways. The easiest method would be for parliament to pass a constitutional amendment eliminating term limits. The problem with this solution is that it would make Russia look like Belarus or Kazakhstan, ruled by a president-for-life. For all the popularity that Putin enjoys, the national embarrassment (never mind the international outcry) might be acute and widespread enough to carry significant political risks.

But at least two other solutions could be found. Both

possess the significant advantage of avoiding a constitutional amendment that President Putin seems reluctant to bless. In one possibility, Putin could become prime minister and then become acting president should the new officeholder find himself incapable of carrying out his duties. Viktor Zubkov, plucked by Putin from obscurity a few weeks ago to be made prime minister, is sixty-six, six years past the retirement age for men in Russia (and eleven years older than Putin). Should Zubkov, with Putin's endorsement, be elected president, he may quickly find the burdens of power too hard to sustain after only a few months in office. And then a new presidential election, which must be held within three months and which Putin would be certain to win, would give Putin another full term in office, without formally violating the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms.

The other option would not require Putin to move out of the Kremlin even for a short time. According to the Russian constitution, the president may declare martial law in the case of aggression or “direct threat of aggression.” A subsequent “martial law regime” could be easily fashioned by the parliament to include the cancellation of elections until the “threat” is over.

The “threat” could be found to emanate from Estonia, which has been sharply denounced by Russia's official propaganda this year. Estonia's ambassador in Moscow has been harassed by a government-organized youth group, and its websites have been subject to cyber attacks. Or it could be Georgia, which borders on Russia's volatile North Caucasus and is in a de facto state of war with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its two breakaway provinces. In Abkhazia, a majority of the population holds Russian passports, and the leaders of South Ossetia have repeatedly expressed the desire to join the Russian Federation.

During a state of emergency, Russians could be counted on to rally around the flag, at least initially. In the longer run, the prolonged presidency would have to be legalized somehow. But, as Lenin wrote, quoting a maxim often attributed to Napoleon, “*on s'engage et puis on voit*”: you get in a fight, and then you see what to do next.

Apart from Nicholas II, who resigned in a revolution, only two Russian leaders have walked away from power: Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. But these two men were remarkable in a larger sense: they presided over a protodemocracy that made Russia the freest it has ever been, save for the eight months from February to November 1917. Protoautocracies—even “softer” ones that, for the moment, enjoy popular allegiance—are harder, and more dangerous, to leave behind.