

The Logic of Putin's 3rd Term

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The smart money says that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will be president from 2012 to 2024. He will be 72 in 2024 and probably will not be up for “castling” with some amiable stooge until he is 78 and eligible to be president yet again.

During his first six-year term, from 2012 to 2018, Putin will go from age 60 to 66. At his peak, vigorous and experienced, he will be aware that this is the time for him to make his mark.

It is true, of course, that some leaders turn in remarkable performances at an even later age. Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in his mid-60s when World War II started, but he was invigorated by that challenge in a way that peacetime never could have done.

Ronald Reagan was 70 when first elected U.S. president in 1980, but he was new to the job. When Putin is 70, he will already be into his fourth term. That does not mean he will have lost his appetite for retaining power, but the chances of Putin striking out on any new, bold course in his fourth and probably last term are slight at best. His upcoming 2012-18 term will be the

one that matters most.

When Putin first became president, he inherited a country weakened by 10 years of chaos and crises that were not in the least of his making. In this respect, Putin to some degree resembles U.S. President Barack Obama of early 2009. But the Russia that Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin in 2000 and the Russia he passed on to President Dmitry Medvedev in 2008 were two very different places. It is the difference between poverty and prosperity, chaos and stability.

There is considerable disagreement over how important a role Putin actually played in that transformation. For example, the man Obama has nominated to be the next U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, currently special assistant to Obama for national security, takes a dubious view of Putin's role. Recall his 2008 Foreign Affairs comment, "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back."

But what counts now is the difference between the Russia Putin received from Yeltsin and the one he is receiving back from Medvedev. Putin will begin his third presidential term from a position of strength, stability and prosperity. Russia has no outstanding important conflicts. Even the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 did not lead to Georgia's blocking Russia's entrance into the World Trade Organization. Russia has begun to attract considerable foreign investment again — for example, ExxonMobil, Coca-Cola and Disney.

Although a few attractive figures exist among the opposition, such as the gadfly blogger Alexei Navalny and the imprisoned former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, there is really no one on the political horizon who could pose the slightest real threat to Putin in a free and fair election in March. And the price of oil remains high.

Thus, all conditions are favorable for Putin to do something of real significance in his third term. He must choose between being a long-term leader of no enduring positive significance and a genuine statesman who peered into the future, saw the dangers facing his country and steered a true and beneficial course. Russia needs major reforms in politics, the judiciary and media, and the economy must be diversified.

Putin has the power, authority and opportunity to carry out these reforms, but will he do it? Ask the smart money.

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