

Putin Turns Into Russia's Most Indispensable Man

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Displaying an inner certitude that allows for little dissent, President Vladimir Putin told NTV television on Oct. 7 that he trusts his gut feeling that he is taking Russia in the right direction. But whether he knows the destination remains unclear. The strategic purpose of Putin's return to the Kremlin continues to escape observers at home and abroad. Six months into his third presidency, an awkward question still hangs in the air: "now what?"

As Timothy Colton of Harvard argues in a recent Valdai Discussion Club interview, there seem to be no new goals for Putin's presidency, "only the old goals with more heavy-handed methods."

In part, this comes from the odd rationale he used to justify his return: to prevent Russia from falling apart, something he had already taken credit for during his previous presidential terms. And this is also due in part to efforts to erase Dmitry Medvedev's presidency as a "flawed experiment in modernization" and roll everything back to 2007.

As Richard Sakwa, of the University of Kent, argues in the same Valdai interview, Putin has failed "to articulate a positive and dynamic vision for Russia's future. It now seems that the maintenance and exercise of power has become an end in itself."

Many of the objectives in his campaign manifestoes gear toward Russia's economic and political modernization. But the policies pursued after the election treat modernization primarily as infrastructure development, while politically the operating code is ultraconservatism, pervasive government control, paternalism and religious fundamentalism. The model seems to be both Pyotr Stolypin's Russia of the early 1900s and the Soviet Union of 1970s — hardly an appealing vision for the future.

Putin's personalization of political authority largely precludes long-term goal setting. Political institutions are purposefully weakened to make room for informal networks based on his personal charisma, like the Popular Front before the State Duma vote. Putin is Russia's most indispensable man, a savior, not a CEO.

Efforts to create an institutionalized framework for political succession through United Russia have been abandoned. An obsession with personal control blocks preparations for Putin to turn the reins over to the post-Soviet generation. Fears are high that a handover would unleash a war within the elites. Putin is deadlocked in his power. As Canadian ex-intelligence analyst Patrick Armstrong put it, "If he built a system that can't work without him, then it doesn't work."

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