

Nobody Knows if Russia Can Survive After Putin

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There is one question many wanted to ask during President Vladimir Putin's latest call-in show but were too afraid: Is there a future for Russia after Putin?

This question is hanging awkwardly in the air as Putin consolidates his power after a brief interregnum of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, which many mistook for an orderly transition to a post-Putin era.

For all its flaws, the Medvedev-Putin tandem was a political innovation to create a more pluralistic governing structure with power institutionally diffused.

Now the system has been reset to the more traditional operating mode of one-man rule. All alternative centers of power, particularly those surrounding Medvedev, have been eliminated.

Putin's rule is being made more personalized. His words and edicts are being treated like

scriptures that are completely devoid of dissent. He is the sole source of policy generation, moral revival and national health. His Popular Front emerges as the "church of Putin."

The country is excessively dependent on the personal fortunes of one individual. The discussion of the country's future after Putin is an uncomfortable taboo. This is imprudent since his total domination of Russian politics and a deliberate elimination of alternatives turn into a major political risk and a source of instability.

The public, meanwhile, is getting wary of this dependency on Putin. According to a recent Levada Center poll, 55 percent want someone else to be elected president in 2018, while 26 percent want Putin re-elected to another term. Only 14 percent want Putin's successor to carry on with his policies, while a whopping 41 percent want a new leader to offer a different strategy for dealing with Russia's problems. People do not want "Putinism" to continue indefinitely. They look for a serious alternative.

This augurs ill for any plans to ensure the post-Putin transition of power by nominating another hand-picked successor. Even with populist candidates like Sergey Shoigu or Dmitry Rogozin, the political and economic cost of imposing another Putin choice could be staggering.

Although today Putin would win re-election, these shifts in the public mood suggest he may face trouble at the polls in 2018. Turning Putin into the center of Russian universe and the most indispensable man only fuels public fatigue, while making Putin personally responsible for anything that might go wrong. It makes his graceful exit all the more difficult.

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