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Who Will Replace Vladimir Putin in 2018?

By Vojtěch Boháč

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Putin, right, and Shoigu, one of Putin's possible successors, attending a meeting in the city of Ryazan on Friday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

Although more than four years remain until the next presidential election, the ground is already taking shape and the first noises have been made about who might enter the 2018 race.

But President Vladimir Putin will almost certainly win re-election if he decides that he wants to stay put, his popularity sealed by the Kremlin stoking public fears that a change in power could bring back the instability that rocked the country during the decade before Putin was first elected in 2000, analysts said.

"Putin is not a man to gamble and take chances. One way or the other, if he stands, he will ensure that he will win," said Mark Galeotti, a professor at New York University, who specializes in Russia's security services.

If Putin should choose to step aside, however, he can be expected to anoint a successor,

perhaps a popular figure such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and thus assure a controlled handover of power.

Meanwhile, the emboldened political opposition remains too weak to mount a serious challenge to the status quo, and analysts said little was likely to change before 2018.

Putin would face an uphill battle if the presidential vote were held today. His popularity has been dented by a sluggish economy, rising living costs and ire among the middle class over a series of heavy-handed laws and policies aimed at muffling the opposition.

Only 30 percent of voters would cast ballots for Putin, according to a recent nationwide survey by the independent Levada pollster. Moreover, about 60 percent of Russians do not want Putin to take part in the 2018 election, while 45 percent would prefer a completely new president without any links to the current government.

But such figures would not stop Putin from winning in 2018, said Levada Center head Lev Gudkov. Ahead of the election, the Kremlin could "exhort" voters by raising the specter of a terrorist menace, by warning of unpredictability if the opposition gained control, and by suggesting that the economy would undergo a "shock therapy" reminiscent of the 1990s under a new leader, he said.

If those efforts fail, the Kremlin could resort to falsifications and other forms of election engineering, he said.

"The likelihood of Putin's victory is high enough," he said.

The sole potential threat to Putin's grip on power within the opposition camp appears to be Alexei Navalny, whose surprisingly strong showing of 27 percent in the Moscow mayoral election in September added credence to his stated ambitions to run for president. But Navalny remains a polarizing figure, even within the ranks of the opposition, and a series of politically tinged criminal cases against him have raised questions about whether he will even be able to run.

"Right now it looks like Navalny could represent the opposition," said Oleg Kashin, journalist and member of the Opposition Coordination Council.

"But," he added, "it seems to me that if there is a figure" who could defeat Putin, "we do not know his name yet. Either he has not appeared or is at the periphery of our attention."

Observers said any candidate who intends to challenge Putin will need a broader platform than just being a representative of the opposition and its interests. "The opposition parties have marginal influence," Kashin said. "Any hope to defeat Putin requires a national candidate who also has supporters among the political elite."

Gudkov said people similar to Navalny would inevitably surface before 2018 but none would be able to unify all the voters who are dissatisfied with Putin. At the same time, he said, the only way to effectively challenge Putin's plutocracy is by consolidating the opposition.

"The problem is not Putin but society itself," Gudkov said.

The first public discussion about Putin's tenure arose during a conference of Russia experts in the town of Valdai in September when Putin acknowledged for the first time that he might seek a fourth term. Speaking at the same conference, newly elected Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov denied harboring any presidential ambitions. "You shouldn't change horses in midstream," Ivanov said.

Ivanov later elaborated on Putin's thinking in an interview with four Russian media outlets in early October. "There are more serious issues to be resolved than thinking about what will happen in 2018," he said.

Nevertheless, many commentators are confident that Putin will handpick a successor if he decides not to run himself. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, whom Putin chose over Ivanov to serve as president from 2008 to 2012, appears to be out of the running, his political capital diminished and his popularity ratings sagging. With Ivanov and Sobyanin removing themselves as contenders, Defense Minister Shoigu is seen as the only serious candidate left within the group of dozen people who are closest to Putin.

Shoigu is a handsome, well-spoken civil servant who worked as emergency situations minister for 18 years before being appointed by Putin to the Defense Ministry last year. He has ranked in opinion polls as Russia's second- and third-most popular politician for much of the past decade. Putin has held the top spot, while Medvedev has placed No. 2 for several of those years. When it comes to issues of trust, Shoigu is now trusted by 20 percent of Russians, second only to Putin with 35 percent, according to a recent survey by the state-run VTsIOM pollster.

Meanwhile, two other scenarios remain that could see Putin walk away from the Kremlin: He could be replaced by his inner circle, or he could depart abruptly without leaving succession plans, said Galeotti, the professor at New York University.

"If things get worse, if the elite begin to regard Putin as a liability rather than an asset, it is entirely possible that he might be faced with a behind-the-scenes palace rebellion, a demand that he step down, with the promise that they will protect and look after him," he said.

He described the Kremlin elite as "powerful, self-interested and ruthlessly pragmatic."

"Putin has survived so long because he has appeared to be their best alternative, but I do not believe they feel any abiding love or loyalty for him," he said.

If Putin leaves without choosing a successor, the ruling authorities will follow in the footsteps of the Politburo after Josef Stalin's death in 1953, he said.

"The Soviet elite wanted to try and find some way of preserving the elements of the system they liked and shedding the elements they did not — above all, their vulnerability to the leader," Galeotti said. "Then so too we could expect to see the Russian elite trying to find some way of instituting Putinism without Putin.

"However, as with the Soviet elite, they will probably be looking for a consensual leader willing to rule in the name of the elite as a whole, not a powerful leader."

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