

# The Kremlin Has No Plans for the Future

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With Russia facing a lost decade of economic stagnation that would reduce its share of global gross domestic product to less than 2 percent, President Vladimir Putin is celebrating his 15 years as leader by being built into a monument.

The Kremlin has taken to releasing a series of fawning television documentaries lionizing Putin's presidential exploits that cast him as Russia's last action hero, the nation's guardian who solely understands Russia's interests and is an international giant capable of defeating Russia's enemies.

Here the Kremlin is adopting the Central Asian template for legitimizing Putin's now all but inevitable presidency for life. Having successfully established the legal and political framework that precludes the emergence of any peer competitor to Putin, they have now turned to his divinization to legitimize the perpetuity of his rule.

Like Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Putin no longer derives his legitimacy through competitive elections, but rules by public acclamation, merely documented in a tightly managed popular ballot.

But like in Central Asia, deifying Putin through propaganda merely masks the brittleness of the regime. The lack of comprehensible succession plans becomes the principal source of instability. No one has a clue what would happen to the Russian state were Putin to unexpectedly depart the scene.

Only Putin's personality underpins the legitimacy of the system; there is no viable political party or a genuine grassroots movement that could survive him to run the country. His power is transmitted through clannish loyalty and prepaid adoration. He rules by unpredictability, ideological triangulation and deflection of responsibility.

Putin's continued presence at the pinnacle of Russian power is required to keep Chechnya's strongman Ramzan Kadyrov within reasonable bounds as he carves out a federal role for himself as "the second only to Putin," undermining the cohesiveness of the Russian state.

Aside from Putin, only presidential aide Vladislav Surkov has any restrictive power over Kadyrov, giving Surkov an oversized role in any succession plans. The enormity of the situation is that any future Russian leader could now govern only with Kadyrov's consent or wage another bloody war in Chechnya.

The irony in the Putin television documentaries, however, is that they unconsciously portray him as a leader whose principal accomplishments are all in the past. They make clear he has no plan for Russia's future.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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