

Was Kudrin Offering Putin a Graceful Exit?

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Is former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin offering President Vladimir Putin a graceful exit? This may be the logic behind Kudrin's call last week for an early presidential election to secure a strong mandate for sweeping economic reform.

Kudrin is the consummate political insider, so it is inconceivable that he would upstage his friend and former boss without giving him a heads up, with a public announcement on such a delicate matter at a closely watched international event just hours before Putin's appearance on the same stage. It was carefully choreographed.

The rationale provided by Kudrin — a popular mandate for change modeled on the recent election in Kazakhstan and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's radical reformist program — may be a cover.

With an 86 percent job approval rating and 64 percent of voters ready to re-elect him, Putin has all the mandate for reforms he needs and the time to implement them till his second six-

year term expires in 2024.

Moving the election forward by a year or two out of fear that the going might get tough and Putin's ratings might slide by 2018, would expose Putin's lack of self-confidence, while actually shortening his term in office.

Nor is it convincing to argue that an early presidential election is the most elegant way of easing Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev out of his employment. Medvedev serves at Putin's pleasure and could be dismissed within an hour.

Putin does not need a new electoral mandate for reforms. He needs a clean slate to relaunch his stumbling presidency and a pathway to a graceful exit. Kudrin is offering a constitutional regime change where a re-elected Putin replaces his entire team by people untainted by the disastrous policies of 2012-15.

A new national security team is needed to negotiate an equitable end to the crisis in Ukraine, patch up the relationship with the West and get sanctions lifted. A new economic team is needed to restore investor confidence and growth. A new media team is needed to restore Russia's credibility after years of mendacity.

In Kudrin's blueprint, Putin's next term would be his last one and his mission would be to devolve power from the imperial presidency to a strong political cabinet backed by a parliamentary majority. This would dismantle the system of personalized power and provide Putin with a graceful exit.

With his legacy at stake, Putin should take Kudrin's offer seriously.

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