

Between Night and Day: Who Will Control Putin's Fourth Term? (Op-ed)

The nighttime rulers of the regime are quietly challenging Putin's role

By [Konstantin Gaaze](#)

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Mikhail Metzel / TASS

Over the last year, Russia's ruling regime has worked a day shift and a night shift.

The public sees President Vladimir Putin by day, running the government and now running for reelection, meeting workers, launching rockets and receiving foreign dignitaries.

At the same time, the country has had a glimpse of its "government by night" with the trial of former economic development minister Alexei Ulyukayev, instigated by Putin's close ally, Igor Sechin, and other instances of intimidation and force exercised by men in the shadows.

The daylight rulers of Russia pretend that either these creatures of the night do not exist, or else that they are only serving the interests of the legitimate government. But this process has become so familiar over the last eighteen years of Putin's presidency that the nocturnal rulers may believe by now that they are the ones really running the country.

As Putin gets ready to serve a fourth presidential term from next March, the main question facing Russia is whether these shadowy nighttime rulers will obey the orders of a leader whose time in office is beginning to expire, or whether they will act as freelancers, ignoring the man who created the authoritarian system that they make use of. We will find out soon enough.

For a long time, the Kremlin operated a well-oiled political machine. At the beginning of each presidential term, Putin strengthened state institutions, overhauling the government and redistributing power within the state bureaucracy.

On each occasion, the power of the state bureaucracy grew and, ultimately, it would emerge as a competitor to the ruling regime in the Kremlin. The regime would then embark on a course correction, dismantling any state structure that challenged its illegitimate decisions. By utilizing its power — either through violence or intimidation — the regime could never allow state institutions to develop and mature.

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In 2002, this process led to a purge of regional elites. In 2005, it involved the nationalization of several sectors of the economy. Once the state was successfully disrupted, the regime was able to reinvent it anew.

This dynamic has been cyclical and, for most of the last eighteen years, it has been managed by the president. By artificially rotating power between the institutions of the state and the personalized regime, Putin was able to maintain credibility at large while still ensuring that power remained concentrated in his hands. But as President Putin approaches his fourth term, his role is being quietly challenged.

The president has been either unwilling or unable to interfere in several high-profile cases, such as the recent criminal trial of former economic development minister Alexei Ulyukayev; the revoking of the license of the European University, a prominent private college in St. Petersburg; and lawsuits against the powerful conglomerate, Sistema Financial Corporation. As Putin retreats to the sidelines, there are signs that his inner circle is expanding their power independently.

The regime's ability to co-opt the state to fulfill its goals carries risk, as these moves are often both illegal and illegitimate. They require regime actors to use extrajudicial justifications for special operations, secret orders, arrests and violence.

Whenever the regime introduces the "national security" argument, it trumps all other political or economic concerns that the state bureaucracy might raise. The regime rules under the assumption that the country is in perpetual crisis and the result is a dictatorship.

The “nighttime” custodians of the regime warn that cyberwar, election interference and sanctions are constant threats to the nation. Yet they prevent regular government bodies — the parliament, courts and the state agencies — from addressing these perceived threats. The Russian state is forbidden from using its constitutional mandate to protect the national interests of the country, yet it is forced to protect the interests of the regime.

Given this state of affairs, we need to understand whether the regime’s recent investigations, surveillance and provocations against government officials were ordered by President Putin. At first glance, it’s easy to pin responsibility on the president. The latest moves could stem from the national narrative of everything being justified because Russia is at war with the West.

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As a result, government officials and oligarchs should repatriate their offshore assets, pay their taxes and contribute to the national interest. Some of them, the argument goes, should spend time behind bars. With Putin at the helm of this project, the president will once again be able to take credit for establishing order among the elite.

But let’s look at another scenario. Let’s imagine that Putin and the regime find themselves at an impasse and the regime acts unilaterally of the president. If the agents of the night operate at their own discretion, it doesn’t actually matter whether the president wanted to jail Ulyukayev or not — what’s important is that he failed to impose his will in an important issue of the state.

If this scenario is correct, the regime no longer obeys the president. It views him as dispensable, as merely being a symbolic representative at the head of the system who no longer wields real power and therefore cannot rule without them.

If this is today’s reality, Putin faces a real challenge during his fourth term as president. Either the president will send the nighttime rulers into retirement, or he will retire himself — even if that retirement is formally called “Putin’s fourth term.”

Russia’s state bureaucrats face an even greater challenge. Are they ready to subordinate themselves to the patronage networks that have formed around the president and cross into the realm of illegality?

Or are they ready to defend their autonomy and their capacity to influence a president whom they see as losing touch with the state and with the regime that is associated with his name?

Konstantin Gaaze is a reporter and political commentator. The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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