

Planning for a (Not So) Post-Putin Russia

The president has made it clear that no one is going anywhere.

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It looks like Putin is preparing a new position for himself. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

Following the unexpected announcement of constitutional changes in Russia and the resignation of the government, the question of whether or not Putinism will end with President Vladimir Putin has instantly become rhetorical. The president made it clear in his state-of-the-nation address on January 15 that no one is going anywhere, despite the subsequent resignation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his government, and swift replacement of the former with a low-profile technocrat, Mikhail Mishustin.

Putin's casual suggestion that the status and role of the insignificant and until recently largely lifeless State Council should be enshrined in the constitution can only mean one thing: that Putin is preparing a new position for himself within that structure. If the State Council's status gets a boost, the president could assume the status of national leader and head of that

structure, which would carry out the role of a parallel presidential administration, or parallel government.

So imagine the following picture: Putin as head of the State Council and father of the nation; Medvedev as president, following a snap election held after the constitutional reforms are approved by the public in a referendum; and a technocrat—Mishustin—as prime minister.

Medvedev has already proven his loyalty to Putin and acceptance of the hierarchy, having previously swapped jobs with Putin in 2008–2012 to enable him to overcome the constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms. In his new role as deputy head of the Security Council, Medvedev will not be the deputy of the council's secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, but that of its chair: Putin. This means that Medvedev is de facto vice president, a good springboard for moving up to the post of president (again). He and Putin could even make a gentlemen's agreement: Putin will be responsible for everything good, while Medvedev will answer for everything bad.

After all, dissatisfaction with socioeconomic conditions in the country is on the rise, and could grow rapidly during the four more years before the next presidential election of 2024. For now, of course, this is merely a hypothesis. Putin didn't reveal any details, but one point is evident: he will not allow himself to become a lame duck.

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In proposing that the parliament should in future confirm the prime minister, Putin is channeling public anger toward the next president, prime minister, and parliamentary speaker, since they will now share responsibility for the appointment of government ministers and, accordingly, for their failings. This proposed reform also shows that any remaining illusions that Putin might suggest someone for that position with liberal views, such as Alexei Kudrin, are now firmly in the realm of a utopia.

Putin's announcement that the new prime minister will be the former head of the tax service, Mishustin, was both unexpected and yet unsurprising at the same time. It's unsurprising in that Mishustin is an ideal Putin-backed candidate: the tax service has cozy ties to the security services, and its help has been enlisted to solve all sorts of issues, including business conflicts. With its adoption of digital technology, it's also considered to be a well-oiled and smoothly functioning state structure.

At the same time, the appointment was counterintuitive: Putin named someone that no one had expected. Sure, people were expecting a technocrat, but someone like the deputy prime minister responsible for digitalization, Maxim Akimov. Mishustin was on no one's radar. Now, with his help, Putin is going to build a country that resembles the Federal Tax Service: with reports and inspections, security assets, and—where necessary—the digitalization of the entire country.

Of the constitutional reforms put forward by Putin, what is truly important and really will change a lot is the proposal to give the Russian constitution—including repressive Russian legislation—priority over international law. This is a violation of the usual hierarchy, in which

international law always takes precedence over national law, and means that Russia can ignore any aspects of international law.

It also means that European Court of Human Rights rulings cannot be enforced. Russian opposition activists can appeal to Strasbourg until they are blue in the face, but Russian judicial institutions will be able to view the international court's verdicts as incompatible with national legislation. These radical changes to Russia's justice system are nothing short of a legal revolution.

All this is apparently just the start. There is still plenty of intrigue ahead, not least regarding the makeup of the new government, what authority Medvedev will have, and the referendum over constitutional reform. The most interesting is still to come.

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