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A New Russia Is Taking Shape and There Is No Turning Back

If Russia ever wants to return to the European model, it will have to dismantle the entire political legacy that this regime has built.

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What is happening is unprecedented in Russian history.



Andrei Nikolsky / TASS

President Vladimir Putin has surprised the pundits again. On January 15, many Kremlin watchers heard him announce planned changes to the constitution and a government reshuffle, understanding that the transition from Putin's personal rule had been primed to begin in 2024.

Now, after Putin's speech in the Duma on March 10, that transition has been delayed almost indefinitely. If the latest proposed constitutional amendments go through, Putin, having

served four presidential terms, will be allowed to run for two more, which could see him keep that office until 2036.

Many were asking why this operation was launched so early, four years before the next scheduled presidential election. Was this to install a new successor quickly before behind-the-scenes plotters could sabotage the transition? No, it seems the Kremlin wanted to re-consolidate the power of the regime without Russian society or local and foreign observers having time to react.

Putin's March 10 speech looked like the denouement of a special operation. He had supposedly come to parliament for a fairly routine debate on the second reading of constitutional amendments. Then suddenly, the cosmonaut-turned-politician Valentina Tereshkova proposed an entirely new amendment (clearly rehearsed in advance): to reset the clock on presidential terms to zero and to remove term limits from the constitution altogether.

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Putin rejected the idea of removing term limits altogether. Asked if he would be able to take part in the next election, Putin said this was a matter for the Constitutional Court.

In Russia, no one of course expects that the court will rule against Putin, meaning that he is almost certain to be able to run in the next election and receive the votes he needs for another term.

Then the people will be asked to vote on the constitutional changes in a referendum in April — but no surprises are expected there.

Russian votes and elections — as they were under Boris Yeltsin — are not about letting the people pick a winner, but about giving the incumbent the aura of new public legitimacy when he wins again.

As far as the men in the Kremlin are concerned, losing power means losing Russia. That is more important than any constitution.

How did so many interpreters misread this process when it began in January? Two factors were important: the interpreters' own desire to see the Russian elite as de-personalized and more European, and the way that Putin himself acted in 2008, the last time he faced a choice of this sort, when he chose to observe the letter of the law.

For sure, those who read the runes had good reason to believe that Putin was planning a managed departure in 2024. There was the talk of limiting presidential terms and the new powers given to the mysterious State Council. And it is quite likely that for the last few weeks, Putin himself was weighing up his own answer to the "2024 question" and eventually chose this outcome as the most attractive one.

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What is happening is unprecedented in Russian history. The head of state is openly

announcing that he is prepared to find a way of staying in the presidential post even after the timeframe set by the law has expired — and that he plans to stay for a long time. Moreover, he is doing that just as expectations that he would depart sooner had become quite intense.

Putin evidently made the decision based on various considerations. He is known to think of the presidential job with reverence, as something akin to an unexpected gift from God. After all, he was elevated to the post while still basically an unremarkable bureaucrat, and then made a success of it.

He also had a negative experience of the four-year "tandemocracy" after his first two terms, when Dmitry Medvedev took over as president and the ruling class was split down the middle. Putin may also be afraid that if he transfers power — even to a hand-picked successor — then he will lose control, and Russia's foreign adversaries will take advantage of the situation.

Finally, the events of the past few weeks may have had an influence. The fall of the oil price, the ruble, and the stock market are an argument for "stability" and continuity. The coronavirus outbreak is both worrying and useful, as it provides an excuse for outlawing public meetings by the opposition.

The main losers of this political game are the "in-system liberals" who were still hoping for top-down incremental political change in Russia, beginning with a more competitive political system in 2024. Now many of those "in-system liberals" may be inclined to believe they have more in common with the opposition than with the Kremlin.

However, it's also worth noting that Putin is a master of keeping his options open. The "Tereshkova amendment" will allow Putin to seek a fifth presidential term in 2024, but does not oblige him to do so. And by refusing to fully commit himself, he avoids becoming a lame duck and keeps speculation about a potential successor to a minimum.

One thing is clear. The new decision changes the face of the Russian regime. The era of dissembling is over.

The leitmotif of the first period of Putin's rule was that Russia was still a rules-based European country, just one that was making itself an exception because of difficult historical circumstances. But there was at least a pretence of observing constitutional norms such as term limits.

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A new Russia is taking shape which is more disdainful of democracy — and takes its cue from many other countries and regimes around the world in being so. Undemocratic but stable China is now openly deemed a more powerful model than Europe.

In this different global context, Putin has seen a chance to distance himself still further from Europe. There may still be discussion about a constitution which is still European on the page, if not in reality. But this is a very different kind of Russian state, unashamedly authoritarian in design. If Russia ever wants to return to the European model, it will have to dismantle the entire political legacy that this regime has built.

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