

Life After Putin: What Happens if the President Dies?

In Russia today, "when" is more important than "if."

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Andrey Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency

For years, observers have been speculating over which fatal illness afflicts Russian President Vladimir Putin. But in recent months this discussion has snowballed. Pancreatic cancer, thyroid cancer, blood cancer, or long-standing back problems? True or not, these rumors have forced everyone to think seriously about what would happen if Putin were gone.

The opposition tends to believe that if Putin departs, his regime will go with him and there would be a chance for a "new perestroika." Conservatives think this moment would be a chance to tighten the screws.

Either way, there is deep uncertainty about what – and who – would come next.

Russia's constitution does not specify what happens if the president passes away while in office, only mentioning the possibility of "health reasons" that mean the president can no longer exercise his or her powers. However, in practice, the procedure is the same as for a resignation.

In the current situation, the question of preparation is key: will Putin's departure be sudden and unexpected, or will he have time to anoint a successor?

If a successor is known in advance, the elites will have less room for maneuver. The more time there is, the more manageable the power transfer will be. If support for Putin remains relatively stable, Putin and his successor will have considerable political capital at their disposal – what we might call "the ideology of Putinism." So far, this ideology has ensured a stable regime.

However, if Putin leaves the post of president suddenly and without having had time to ready a successor, everything becomes much more unpredictable. A lot would depend on factors beyond Putin's control, and the role of the elite would be far more significant.

According to the constitution, the prime minister becomes acting president in the event of the president not being able to do his or her job. But the acting president's powers are limited: they cannot dissolve the State Duma, call for a referendum or propose constitutional revisions.

The status of "acting president" seems like an ideal starting point for a potential successor, which is why many observers believe a power transfer would begin with the appointment of a new prime minister.

For all his merits, it's unlikely Putin sees current Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin as his successor. Mishustin is not close enough to Putin and has been unable to become more than a [political technocrat](#). Even if something happens to Putin tomorrow and Mishustin becomes acting president, this does not automatically make him the favorite candidate to win a subsequent presidential election (because he has not been chosen by Putin).

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In fact, if Mishustin were suddenly placed in the position of acting president without adequate preparation, he would be in a very difficult situation. He would be dependent on the presidential administration, and any major independent political decisions, or staffing changes in government, would be sure to cause conflict.

The exact constitutional procedure in the event of the president's death is that the Federation Council has 14 days to call presidential elections (the vote must take place within three months of the termination of the president's powers). If the Federation Council doesn't call elections in time, it falls to the Central Election Commission.

If there is no named successor, the role of formal institutions would grow, along with the opportunities for the elite to play a role. Right now, the key institutions of power function as parts of Putin's informal regime. But if Putin were to leave without a successor, they would

become conduits for the interests of large corporations, the security services, the leadership of United Russia, and influential associates and friends of Putin.

An intense struggle for official levers of influence would quickly get underway – and the key question would become whether the elites were able to reach an agreement on a successor.

Whether a consensus emerged or not would depend on many factors, but above all, on the state of Putinism itself. Today, when the government has abnormally high ratings, the population is mobilized and the opposition silenced, the chance that the elites would come to an agreement — or rather, that a part of the elite would successfully impose their choice — is high. Conservative forces, primarily the “siloviki,” would likely take the initiative, which means the subsequent regime would be more violent, more hawkish, more repressive, and even more radically intransigent. Like it or not, this sort of worldview is far more in line with Russian public opinion at the moment than a modernizing or reform agenda.

But if Putin departs when the pro-war bloc is weakened, when there is less political support for the regime, higher levels of discontent and more economic problems, then the “siloviki” will have less room for maneuver and the voice of modernizers and big business will be stronger. If this happens, choosing a successor would be a far more conflicted process.

Either way, a great deal would depend on the nature of the political mainstream. The “healthier” the anti-Western, anti-liberal, conservative ideology when Putin shuffles off this mortal coil, the more likely it is that the elite will strive to keep things as they are – or tighten the screws. But, if things are falling apart politically and economically, general disaffection is on the rise, the systemic opposition has managed to revive and Putinism as an idea in decay, the chances of Russia ending up with a reforming – albeit weak – president are much higher.

Put simply, given the current political environment in Russia, the sooner Putin drops dead, the greater the chances of a conservative revanche.

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