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Is It Possible to Plan for Life After Putin?

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Discussions of how a post-Putin Russia might look have been on the rise for some time, even if such a concept remains wishful thinking for the time being. On one hand, imagining Russia without Putin could be seen as a form of therapy, a response to a feeling of total hopelessness in the face of an increasingly terrible war. On the other, Putin's rule will someday come to an end, and Russia needs to start preparing for this.

History and politics in Russia are highly personalized, and the demise or departure of any leader is likely to spark a new trajectory for the country. Stalin’s death ushered in the thaw, while the ouster of Khrushchev a decade later led to the Brezhnev era of stagnation, which eventually gave way to Gorbachev's agenda of reform.

More recently, Dmitry Medvedev's decision not to seek a second presidential term cleared Putin's path to return to the top job and marked the end of Russia's policy of normalization and the dawn of authoritarianism.

Putin will one day have to step down as president, no matter how much members of Russia's elite might kid themselves that he is somehow immortal. Once Putin goes, much will change, and Russian history teaches us that even if Putinism outlives Putin, it won't be for long: the next Russian leader will almost certainly be forced to liberalize to ensure their survival.

But it will be harder for Russians to emerge from the maelstrom of hybrid totalitarianism than it was for the Germans or Spanish. The Putin regime now only exists as a vehicle for self-preservation — which, at this late stage in its life cycle, requires war. To step back from military conflict would mean ceding power to others, which is why the first challenge for any Putin successor will be the categorical rejection of militarism.

Despite what the Kremlin's propagandists say, the enemy is not at the gates of Moscow and Russia is at no risk of foreign occupation. Indeed, the opposite is the case as Russia's expired brand of Putinism has left the country on par with North Korea in terms of attracting investors.

No help can be expected from the West in Russia's post-Putin transition either, making comparisons to the Germans after World War II moot. Russians will instead have to engage in a process of self-examination to combat their regime-imposed historical ignorance and work hard to restore the country's corroded institutions.

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However, liberalization will also force Russia to reckon with its own past, to decide once and for all where its national borders lie, to face its moral and financial responsibility towards Ukraine, and to confront both its collective guilt and collective responsibility for the war.

Moreover, after decades of subsisting on a diet of wild conspiracy theories about Russophobia and the country's humiliation at the hands of the West, Russians will have to confront the psychological toll that this has taken on the population as a whole.

The elites have been discredited. Yet even in post-war Germany, former members of the Nazi Party held high administrative and even political positions. It is impossible to predict how the cards will fall, but the speed of Russia's recovery from the moral and political depths to which it has fallen depends on the quality of those who attempt to pull the country out of it.

Germany was lucky; it had Adenauer and Erhard, while Spain had King Juan Carlos. Russia has an impressive substitute bench serving jail time and living abroad, and while it may be small, it remains a cause for optimism.

Back when debate was still possible in Russia, the opposition was often subject to ridicule for criticizing government decisions without putting forward any alternatives. Rejecting the errors of the past and disavowing the *ancien régime* will be necessary acts for any future leadership intent on advancing an agenda for a post-Putin Russia, as was the case in the late years of perestroika.

Where are we heading? Well, before Russia heads anywhere, it will first need to make a full break with Putinism. Then it can begin to dismantle the raft of authoritarian laws that have

been introduced in the past decade and return to the rule of law and constitutional order.

This will be the umpteenth time in Russian history that this feat has been attempted, but nothing can be done about that. We must now remake our political system, imbue it with humanity and rebuild the moral fiber of our nation. It might not be the last time we'll be forced to do this, but repetition is the mother of learning.

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