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Despite His Victory, Putin's Problems Will Grow

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On March 18, Russia elected Vladimir Putin for a fourth presidential term, making his rule the longest since Joseph Stalin's. But this next term will be a new experience for both Putin and the Russian people. In terms of foreign policy, Moscow faces increased Western challenges. Internally, Putin will have to decide whether to prolong his rule in 2024 or pick a successor – a process with significant foreign policy reverberations that will involve reshuffles and elite infighting inside the Kremlin.

In terms of foreign policy, Putin's fourth term can be expected to be characterized by the challenge of an invigorated and united western front. Russian geopolitical influence in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova has diminished over the past decade. Western encroachment on what had always been considered a Russian sphere of influence has reached new levels, unimaginable even at the time of the Soviet break-up in the early 1990s. Russia's entire western frontier (except for Belarus) is now under Western influence. Dark pages from Russian history are well-remembered these days across the country.

Whereas in the past, Russian leaders managed to outmaneuver Charles XII, Napoleon, and Hitler, Putin faces a rather different challenge: with the EU expanding economically and NATO militarily, Europe is united, and Moscow sees little opportunity to break that front (at least for now). The foreign policy blunders that contributed to this state of affairs happened under Putin, and he will have to deal with the consequences in his new presidential term.

The US, too, is ratcheting up pressure on Russia by providing military cooperation and general diplomatic and economic support to Ukraine and

Georgia (and, to a lesser extent, Moldova). The battle for the former Soviet states will play an important role in Russian politics over the next few years.

Putin also faces problems with the rise of China, though not necessarily military ones. While Russian politicians are not voicing concerns about Beijing's rise, it should not be inferred that the Kremlin is not worried. Indeed, Central Asia, another traditional powerbase of the Russian state, has already experienced the Chinese pull. Russia has lost its primary economic position in the region, while Beijing is increasing its security presence: recent reports indicate that the Chinese are involved in security on the Afghan-Tajik border as well as in the Nagorno-Badakhshan region (eastern Tajikistan).

Putin will also find that on the grand strategic level, his country, which lies between the powerful EU to the west and China, with its Belt and Road Initiative, to the east, is less competitive economically. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is not producing the necessary results, while Russia's economy – though it has emerged from recession – will lag in terms of economic growth for quite some time.

Putin will also face three major foreign policy questions in his new term: 1) finalizing a settlement in Syria; 2) reaching a consensus with Japan over the Kuril Islands; and 3) resolving the Ukraine conflict.

In Syria, Russia will find it more and more difficult to keep its powerful position, as it is being constantly challenged by an assortment of regional actors. Now that Bashar al-Assad's government has been strengthened, Putin will look towards an exit strategy (without yet withdrawing Russia's military contingent).

Japanese PM Shinzo Abe is expected to visit Russia later this spring for yet another summit with Putin. Abe continues to seek a final settlement of the Kuril Islands matter and a formal peace treaty with Russia.

Perhaps the most important theater for Putin will be Ukraine, where he might make concessions such as a de-escalation of fighting in east Ukraine and even the facilitation of a long-term ceasefire. However, strategically speaking, Moscow will work intensively to keep Kiev out of NATO and the EU.

On the domestic front, Putin's Russia is experiencing internal change. The most noticeable development is an ongoing shift in the center of gravity in the Russian opposition to Putin away from liberals and democrats and towards communists and nationalists.

This correlates with the existing trend across the country in favor of stricter rule that puts regional autonomies on a tighter leash. Tatarstan, one of the richest

regions, experienced this when the Kremlin decided not to continue a power-sharing deal with Kazan. State security apparatuses are set to gain bigger influence, a trend clearly visible over the past couple of years.

Problems are also foreseen among Russian youth. Although many (perhaps the majority of) youngsters do not contest Putin's rule, many believe that rule should not continue indefinitely. Putin is the only leader they remember, and the Kremlin is concerned about protest sentiment emerging among students.

The sidelining of liberals and a general trend towards tighter control are hallmarks of Russian history. Numerous Russian emperors and various rulers (including former president Dimitri Medvedev) promised to introduce liberal rule, which eventually turned out to be impossible.

But there is one important nuance to Putin's new term: constitutionally it will be his last. Moreover, by 2024 (the end of his term), Putin will be at a relatively advanced age. Putin himself, in his victory speech, alluded to his age and the reality that he will not be around forever. It is thus likely that in the coming years Putin will lay the foundations for a transition through constant reshuffles and the gradual promotion of his potential successor.

It is also, however, entirely possible that the Russian president will change the constitution. He has said he will not do this, but it will depend on the domestic and foreign situation. In fact, the pull towards perpetual presidential rule is visible all over the former Soviet space. Putin might follow that lead.

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