DEBATE: Putin in Power until 2024: What Does it Mean?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

BESA Center Online Debate No. 12, June 14, 2018

Q: Vladimir Putin easily won the recent election in Russia and secured another presidential term. The result cements him as one of the most powerful leaders in modern Russian history, but also poses questions for the day after on both the domestic and the international level. While the US administration has not yet clarified its approach vis-à-vis Russia and the EU remains largely divided, Putin is gaining ground – for example in the Syrian arena – and his popularity remains high at home. BESA joins the debate by posing the question: Putin in power until 2024: What does it mean?

Respondents: Sharyl N. Cross, Andrey Kortunov, Simon Saradzhyan, Christopher Walker, Friedrich Schmidt, Dimitar Betchev, Evgeni Klauber

Sharyl N. Cross, Director of the Kozmetsky Center at St. Edward’s University, Austin, Texas and Global Policy Scholar, Kennan Institute, Wilson Center, Washington DC

Vladimir Putin emerged from the March 2018 election backed by a strong mandate with 76% of the vote to continue to hold Russia’s presidency for another six-year term until 2024. While the political system in the US is sharply polarized and the western
liberal world order is threatened by national and populist resurgence, religious extremism and economic turmoil, Russia’s authoritarian system centers around a single leader resembling a modern-day Tzar perceived as quite capable of defending Russian national interests.

Vladimir Putin in power until 2024: What does it mean? First, Putin will continue to focus on asserting influence on the world stage securing Russia’s place as a leading power in a post-unipolar and emerging transitioning multi-polar world order. In advancing Russia’s geopolitical interests, the West should anticipate that Moscow will continue to pursue the Kremlin’s agenda among the nations of the Eurasian neighborhood and beyond, especially in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Putin has unveiled plans for upgrading Russia’s arms capabilities with new nuclear weapons development programs underway aiming to ensure credible deterrent capacity vis-à-vis the US and its NATO allies. While the prospects of overcoming the tremendous deficit of trust between Russia and the West and restoring normalized bilateral relationships with the US and its NATO allies seems quite unlikely for the immediate future, Russia’s cooperation is still critical for managing a broad range of shared security challenges.

Putin has announced that the first priority for this next six-year term will be raising the standard of living for the Russian population. Obviously, stabilizing and reducing tensions between Russia and the West would be important to the Kremlin in achieving these domestic objectives. Skilled diplomacy and vision could prevent the onset of a new cold war, hot war, or dangerous clash between Russia and the West leading to adverse unintended consequences. The excessive demonization of Vladimir Putin in the West has not been productive. The success of the US and its NATO allies in managing the relationship with Vladimir Putin over the next six-year period will be absolutely critical for avoiding an outright US-Russia kinetic confrontation, an escalating arms race, containing nuclear proliferation, brokering regional conflict flashpoints, countering terrorism, and much more.

Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow

Over the four years that have passed since the beginning of the crisis in and around Ukraine, the Russian economic and political systems have demonstrated a lot of
resilience. The Kremlin has been able to minimize the negative impact of Western sanctions, maintain overall social and political stability, and avoid making significant concessions to its international adversaries. This resilience might erode in the long-term future, but the margin of safety for the Russian leadership remains substantial. This means that breakthroughs in relations between Russia and the West are unlikely in the short- and medium-term. However, this does not preclude tactical adjustments, situational collaboration, and de-escalation efforts.

Russian foreign policy is likely to be opportunistic rather than strategic, reactive rather than proactive, and risk-evading rather than risk-taking. Its successes and failures will thus depend largely on overall trends in global politics – specifically whether the current crisis of the liberal world order continues to deepen or we see a renaissance of a norm-based international system. In any case, one can predict a continuation of Russia’s “Asia pivot,” continuous attempts to advance Eurasian integration projects, and an emphasis on national sovereignty as a top priority in dealing with the outside world. Vladimir Putin is likely to stick to his vision of the world as growing less Western, less dominated by the US, more pluralistic in terms of values, and generally less stable.

Simon Saradzhyan, Founding Director, Russia Matters Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Cambridge, MA

In the foreign policy domain, Vladimir Putin’s new presidential term will probably be associated with enduring tensions between Russia and the West. These tensions will be fueled by competition between Moscow on one side and Washington and Brussels on the other, within and without the post-Soviet neighborhood. Putin believes the West has entered secular decline while Asia (primarily China) has embarked on a period of growth at rates Russia cannot match. Therefore, in addition to continuing to treat Western powers as competitors, if not adversaries, Putin can be expected to further deepen relations with Asian powers in general and China in particular.

In the domestic policy domain, the recent anemic performance of the Russian economy should in theory prompt Putin to embark on deep structural reforms aimed at rebuilding the country’s economic model. His past models for Russian economic growth – which relied on increasing oil and gas prices, then on internal consumption, then on increasing defense expenditures – no longer seem to be working. For the
Russian economy to be competitive in the 21st century, the Kremlin will have to pursue reforms that would foster growth in high-tech sectors while lessening the state’s involvement in sectors where private owners are much more effective than state-controlled entities, which now account for up to 70% of Russian GDP.

However, state leaders rarely embark upon deep reforms late in their rule in the absence of an existential threat, and I do not expect Putin to do so either. He can be expected to continue to incrementally constrain opportunities for real political competition – the “boiling frog” tactic – to ensure that he remains in control of Russia until (or even after) he picks a successor who will honor his interests and the interests of the ruling elite in general.

Despite such consolidation of power, I expect Putin to remain fairly popular among many common Russians, though it is difficult to gauge how popular he really is given the state’s direct or indirect control of the national electronic media and pressure on independent pollsters.

Christopher Walker, Vice President for Studies and Analysis, National Endowment for Democracy, Washington DC

The leadership in Moscow already operates with largely unchecked power and without the accountability that could be provided by independent institutions. Sadly, such institutions have been harshly repressed and undermined by the Russian authorities over the course of many years. The prospect of Vladimir Putin’s holding power as paramount leader possibly for a quarter century or more will move the Russian system into uncharted terrain. The authorities’ sidelining of critical institutions – especially independent media and civil society – is, among other things, a prescription for unbridled corruption of the sort in which the Russian system is mired.

The kleptocracy that has taken a grip in Russia will undoubtedly deepen in the absence of meaningful political reform, which itself is bound to be suffocated by the country’s dominant kleptocratic elite. For the time being, the Russian system therefore is trapped in an unvirtuous circle. In an era of globalization, there is no hiding from
the reach of Russia’s corruption. This endemic, supercharged corruption has metastasized and is now a problem for countries beyond Russia’s borders. As was noted in a recent issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Russia’s kleptocracy has become a multifaceted tool that is used both for purposes of domestic political control and the projection of global influence.

**Friedrich Schmidt**, Moscow Correspondent, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Vladimir Putin was the only candidate who did not present a program for the Russian presidential elections on March 18. There was no need. Putin himself, who has been in power for 18 years, was and remains the program for Russia. The date of his latest reelection, or rather acclamation, is telling: the fourth anniversary of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

When Russia’s middle class grew in the years of the oil boom, it only challenged Putin’s authoritarianism. The annexation of Crimea signifies the prioritization of archaic ideas of national greatness over modern concepts of economic development and peaceful coexistence with neighbors and partners. “Crimea” was the president’s new deal and boosted his then ailing popularity.

Within Russia, we are unlikely to see any reforms liberating the private sector during Putin’s new term. In his first term as president, Putin was already paving the way for his version of state capitalism and cronyism. It is in line with his personal rather than institutional approach and the Kremlin’s fear of losing control. These factors also fuel repression against the remaining dissidents. They are an impediment to growth as they drive out the young and well-educated people any economy needs to move forward.

For Putin, the main task in the coming years will be either to find a trusted successor who will guarantee his and his cronies’ total impunity or come up with a pseudo-legal means by which he can remain in power after 2024 despite constitutional restrictions. At 65, Russia’s ruler appears to be in good health, but the personalization of power entails risks for stability. After all, Putin is human too.

Outside Russia, the president has used the vacuum left by Washington’s retreat during the Obama years to impose himself as a decisive power broker in Syria. Putin relishes this
image of himself and of Russia. However, his display of strength verging on brutality depends on a lack of commitment and strategy on the part of the Western countries. Putin strikes where his adversaries are weak; he is deterred by strength and resolve.

Moreover, Putin’s intervention to save the Assad regime is not yet over, despite the fact that as of April 2018, he has three times declared some sort of victorious withdrawal. The president’s two wars in Ukraine and Syria are costly not only with regard to the Russian budget but also with regard to the country’s reputation.

Moscow’s government and media have aligned to form a unified propaganda apparatus that consistently accuses the West of “Russophobia,” whether it concerns state-sponsored doping, the downing of flight MH17, or the use of chemical weapons. Putin is presented as Russia’s savior from, and avenger of, Western offenses. This nurtures a self-fulfilling prophecy of confrontation and isolation that has become Putin’s recipe for power. We are likely to see more of this in the coming years on different fronts.

**Dimitar Betchev, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, Washington DC**

Putin’s fourth term will revolve around two interrelated issues: (1) how to arrange a smooth succession; and (2) how to preserve stability in Russia in the face of economic, demographic, and institutional challenges and ensure the regime survives into the future. It is not inconceivable that the Kremlin will rewrite the constitution to extend Putin’s tenure, as Xi did in China with the abolition of the 10-year limit. Another option would be to establish a new position, above day-to-day politics, allowing Putin to retain control over strategic decisions, notably in foreign policy, yet pass the baton to someone else.

Russian foreign policy won’t change. The confrontation with the West is becoming entrenched and no grand bargain with the Trump administration appears feasible at this point. Russia will seek to exploit Western weakness and lack of resolve, be it in strategically important regions such as the Middle East (in league with Iran, Turkey, and others) or as regards polarization in domestic politics across Europe and the US.

Though Moscow will flex its military muscle to political ends, it is unlikely it will go over the brink given US/NATO preeminence. The alliance with China is growing in
importance, but it is clear that Russia is the junior partner (a historical reversal, if one takes a longer perspective on relations).

Europe is both a challenge and an opportunity as the Kremlin could do deals with individual countries and play "divide and conquer." Efforts to exert control over the former Soviet Union will enjoy mixed success. The Eurasian Economic Union is having a hard time getting off the ground, and the EU and China are increasingly important trade partners for former Soviet republics. Moscow will have to rely increasingly on punishment rather than reward to influence its claimed "sphere of privileged interest." Muscular foreign policy will give Putin legitimacy at a time of economic hardship and distrust in "the system" threatening domestic cohesion.

Evgeni Klauber, Visiting Professor, Tel Aviv University

On March 18, 2018, Vladimir Putin was elected for the fourth time as Russia’s president, a position he can hold (barring constitutional changes) until 2024. Putin, now 65 years old, possesses almost unlimited power in Russia. He has served either as president or prime minister since 1999. He started his career as an intelligence officer in the KGB (Committee for State Security) and climbed to the top ranks of the Russian government under President Boris Yeltsin’s administration. In 1998, Putin was promoted to serve as the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Putin first served as Russia’s president in 1999, when Yeltsin stepped down and approved him first as prime minister and then as acting president. Putin was elected to the presidency for the first time in 2000 and then again in 2004, but stepped aside after the two terms to fall in line with the limits set by the Russian constitution. For the next four years, however, Putin continued to hold high de facto executive power by serving as prime minister with his loyal ally Dmitry Medvedev acting as president. In 2012, Putin was elected to serve as Russia’s president once again for his fourth six-year term.

So why have relations with Moscow recently turned so toxic? Certainly not because Putin’s Russia is an economic threat to the West, as is China. Economically, Russia is small fry: its GDP is comparable to that of Spain. The British economy is roughly twice the size of Russia’s, and the EU’s area has an economy getting on for 10 times that of Putin’s state. Russia’s income per head is down there with post-crisis Greece.
Relations with Russia have become toxic because the US and the other Western democracies realized recently that resisting the world's two other superpowers, Russia and China, is now their number-one national security priority, ahead of counterterrorism. The US and Europe have already blamed and will continue to blame Putin’s military modernization and nuclear rhetoric for that shift.

Russia’s involvement in the Syrian crisis will continue to have important implications for the balance of power in the region. That involvement is the product of Putin’s desire to make his empire equal in to the superpowers, such as the US and China, and regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, in terms of global and regional influence. Israel is also affected by these implications, given the change in the balance of power and the risk of internal Syrian pressures spilling over the northern borders and into the Golan Heights.

*For Twitter dissemination: #Besaonlinedebates #Russia #Putin #US*

@KozmetskyCenter
@Russian_Council
@faznet
@NEDemocracy
@Walker_CT
@BelferCenter
@saradzhyan
@AtlanticCouncil
@DimitarBechev
@TelAvivUni
@tzogopoulos