



After Putin: Lessons from Autocratic Leadership Transitions

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After Putin: Lessons from Autocratic Leadership Transitions

The Biden administration came into office seeking to create a stable and predictable relationship with Russia. Determined to devote more time and attention to China, Washington sought to reduce tensions with Putin's Russia in order to avoid confrontation that might derail the administration's agenda. Yet despite Washington's approach, relations with Russia have turned out to be anything but stable and predictable. On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin's war of choice catalyzed a massive shift in international perceptions of Putin and a series of responses—ranging from punishing sanctions on Russia's financial sector to private sector steps to curtail business operations inside the country—that have fundamentally altered relations with Russia. It is now impossible to imagine that there could be any substantive improvement in US-Russia relations while Putin remains in power.

If Washington cannot expect confrontation between the United States and Russia to abate so long as Putin is at the helm, the questions that naturally follow are: how much longer will Putin be in office, and what are the prospects that US-Russia relations could be different under a future Russian leader?

Although Putin's attack on Ukraine has increased the challenges he faces at home, he may very well be able to weather the backlash. History is rife with embattled autocrats who successfully maintained power despite domestic economic challenges and significant opposition. High and rising levels of repression, tight

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control over Russia's media environment, and historically loyal security services position Putin to withstand mounting dissent. If Putin does endure the turbulence, he has the legal authority to remain in office until 2036. This is thanks to constitutional changes in 2020 that allowed Putin—then already in power for twenty years—to reset the clock on his presidential term. Putin could even, in theory, once again find a way to change term limits to allow him to stay beyond 2036, at which time he would be 83 years old.

Conversely, Putin's war in Ukraine could precipitate an earlier than expected departure. Protests inside Russia in the earliest days of Putin's military campaign were larger than anticipated given the high levels of repression. Likewise, signs of elite dissatisfaction have been more evident than normal. Celebrities signed letters opposing the war and the children of Russia's elite have spoken out. There have even been signs that the oligarchs are uncomfortable; shortly after the war began, Anatoly Chubais posted a picture of Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader murdered in front of the Kremlin, on his Facebook page, and prior to being sanctioned, Roman Abramovich announced he would sell the Chelsea football club and direct the net proceeds of the sale to a charitable foundation benefiting victims of the war in Ukraine. Such dissention may also be present among the security service. There are credible reports that the commander of the FSB intelligence agency's unit responsible for Ukraine was placed under house arrest and a small number of Russia's National Guard were allegedly fired for refusing to deploy to Ukraine. Forecasting the timing of a leadership exit through modes like protests or elite moves to push Putin out, however, is difficult given the closed nature of the Russian system and the challenges of predicting protest dynamics in authoritarian settings.

The absence of an alternative has been perhaps the most important factor sustaining Putin's rule

Not only are there questions about when and how Putin will exit office, but there is just as much debate about what comes after him. Russia is a highly personalized authoritarian regime; Putin dominates the political system. He has spent the last 22 years ensuring that no viable alternative to him exists. The absence of an alternative has been perhaps the most important factor sustaining his rule. Russians, including some in elite circles around Putin, may be deeply concerned that

Putin is taking Russia in the wrong direction. But without an alternative center of gravity around which the public and/or the elite can coalesce, Putin is positioned to navigate the domestic challenges he faces. While this is a successful strategy for maintaining power, it creates a fraught and precarious context for an eventual transfer of power.

For some observers, Putin's departure holds the potential to usher in a more liberal and democratic Russia. According to this narrative, the United States has a Putin problem, and once he departs new possibilities will emerge for a less antagonistic and more democratic Russia. A new Russian leader could, for example, reverse course in Ukraine in return for sanctions relief and even take steps to normalize relations with the United States. Other observers, in contrast, warn that whoever replaces Putin is just as likely to sustain the status quo or be even worse. A new leader, this argument goes, may struggle to keep competing factions from destabilizing the system. Russia's next leader, the argument continues, may also have an incentive to stoke nationalist undercurrents already present in Russia to increase public support and consolidate power. In sum, questions about when and how Putin will go and what comes after him remain unclear but are more salient than ever.

To shed light on these critical questions, we assess how political transitions have unfolded in authoritarian regimes with longtime leaders like Putin. Although Putin's war on Ukraine complicates comparisons to other authoritarian regimes that most resemble Putin's Russia, we nonetheless attempt to harvest insights from these comparative cases. Political science research suggests that there is something unique about regimes governed by longtime authoritarian leaders compared to those with more frequent leadership turnover. The longer an authoritarian leader is in power, the more likely it is that regime officials and the political and economic elite share a mutual understanding of the rules of the game, especially the unspoken ones, thereby facilitating stability. Such established regimes, in turn, generate different dynamics and outcomes relative to more contested autocracies, and can therefore be expected to behave differently in terms of leadership transition.¹ For these reasons, we look to data on contemporary authoritarian regimes where leaders have been in power for twenty years or more to offer insights into how Russia's political transition might unfold.

Even beyond Putin's initiation of conflict in Ukraine, there are other ways in which Russia is unique compared to a number of its authoritarian contemporaries: it has been a powerful actor in the international arena, its people are well educated, and it has higher levels of economic wealth relative to many of its longtime authoritarian peers, for example. That said, we draw on a rich tradition in comparative politics to argue that there are patterned manners of behavior across longtime authoritarian regimes, even embattled ones, that can improve understanding of how political change might unfold in Russia. We underscore that these insights are not predictive—particularly amid the backdrop of war—but instead are intended to serve as a baseline understanding of how things tend to play out in settings like Putin's Russia.

Underlying Data

For this task, we use data on contemporary authoritarian regimes from Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, coded from 1946–2010 and updated by Frantz to run through 2019.² These data measure the start and end dates of authoritarian regimes and their leaders, authoritarian regime type, leader age, and modes of regime transition in and out of power. To measure how authoritarian leaders fall from power, we use data from Milan Svobik that are coded through 2012 and which we updated to run through 2019.³ We focus our analysis on the post–Cold War era because, based on our knowledge of authoritarian regimes, the dynamics of post–Cold War autocracies differ from those during the Cold War in meaningful ways.⁴ The sample we use for the analysis presented here, therefore, includes all 123 authoritarian regimes (and the 181 leaders governing them) in

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power at any point during the years 1992–2019 (we exclude monarchies from our analysis due to their unique political dynamics with respect to leadership succession). We also, at times, further restrict the sample to those regimes that are highly personalist and with aging leaders (leaders that are 65 or older) to make an even more direct comparison to Putin’s Russia. We define personalist leaders as those who have concentrated power in

their own hands, as is true with Putin, rather than sharing influence with a strong central committee of a political party, royal family, or military junta. Though personalist leaders like Putin do not rule alone, they rely on a smaller and more concentrated set of backers relative to other types of authoritarian systems.

The leadership codings capture the identity of the *de facto* leader in charge, not the *de jure* leader. In some instances, there are differences between the two in authoritarian settings, where what is written on paper does not always hold meaning. A good example of this comes from Kazakhstan, where Qasym-Zhomart Toqaev became president in 2019, but Nursultan Nazarbayev was the leader in charge behind the scenes until he was forced out of his role as chairman of the country’s Security Council in January 2022. Likewise in Russia under Putin, Dmitry Medvedev was technically president from 2008–2012, even though Putin was the individual who wielded the most political influence. For this reason, Putin is coded as the leader of Russia in all post-Yeltsin years in our dataset. (This assessment is consistent with the codings of the widely used Archigos dataset of political leaders.⁵)

How Long Might Putin Rule?

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has raised questions about his longevity in office. Prior to the war, Putin was poised to maintain power for some time. Our research shows that once leaders like Putin make it to twenty years in office, they are likely to stay a lot longer. Since 1992, the typical dictator who was at least 65 years of age and had governed for 20 years or more ended up ruling for a median of 30 years. When we further restrict the sample to include those leaders who were at least 65 years of age, had governed for 20 years or more, and were characterized as highly personalist leaders, they ended up ruling for an average of 36 years.

We also examined the trajectories of leaders who, like Putin, successfully extended their time in office. Not all leaders seek to prolong their rule and even among those who do, not all are successful. History is awash with leaders who faced widespread backlash against their efforts to remain in power. Dr. Kristin McKie finds, for example, that about a third of all leaders from 1975–2018 who reached the end of their constitutionally mandated final term in office attempted to circumvent term limits. Of those, about half failed in their attempts.⁶ The key message is that those leaders who successfully extend or remove term limits are likely to have much in common, given that they would have had to manufacture domestic conditions that: a) lead them to conclude that extending their rule is a domestically viable option and b) allow them to mitigate opposition to their efforts and facilitate their success.

According to data from the Comparative Constitutions Project, there were thirteen authoritarian leaders from 1992–2009 who successfully pursued term limit extensions.⁷ In the vast majority of these instances (twelve), they stayed in power for at least a decade longer and/or died in office.⁸ In only one case in this time period—Tunisia, where Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was ousted in a revolt seven years after he extended his term limits—did a regime transition to democracy. In all other cases, those term-extending leaders are still in power, or the regimes persisted or transitioned to a new authoritarian regime after they exited office. Given that Putin reset his term limits in 2020, this further suggests he has the potential to maintain power for some time to come.

Despite Putin's potential for longevity, his hold on power is undoubtedly more precarious now than it was before he invaded Ukraine. So how have longtime leaders like Putin ended up exiting office?

How Is Putin Likely to Exit Office?

In his annual call-in show on June 30, 2021, Putin told Russians, “A time will come when, I hope, I can say that such and such a person is worthy in my

opinion of leading such a wonderful country like Russia, our homeland."⁹ His comments may have offered a window into Putin's thinking about succession. It is widely speculated, for example, that Putin viewed Kazakhstan's political transition as a potential model for his own. In March 2019, after 29 years in power, Nursultan Nazarbayev unexpectedly stepped down as president, allowing his chosen successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (then the speaker of the upper house of parliament) to become the country's acting president for the remainder of his term. Tokayev went on to receive Nazarbayev's endorsement as the ruling party Nur Otan's candidate, winning snap presidential elections in June 2019. Yet while Nazarbayev officially relinquished his title as president, he continued to wield significant power and influence from his perch as Chairman of the Security Council.

That all changed unexpectedly in January 2022, in a series of events that have likely tarnished the viability of the Kazakh model for Putin's succession. Amid

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widescale protests in Kazakhstan—the result of deep underlying discontent with the political system set off by a rise in fuel prices—Tokayev moved opportunistically to consolidate his political power and sideline Nazarbayev and his backers. In short order, Tokayev forced Nazarbayev to step down as chairman of the security council and arrested powerful Nazarbayev-linked figures, such as intelligence chief Karim Massimov. Nazar-

bayev and his family's wealth and status have been dismantled and, cognizant of the need to be on the winning side, the Kazakh elite rushed to declare their loyalty to Tokayev. The turmoil and especially the fate of Nazarbayev and his family underscores the problems that can arise when leaders designate a successor.

Historically, such early identification and transfer of official power to a replacement has been relatively rare. Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, of course, orchestrated the handoff of power to Putin in 1999, smoothing the succession process in Russia's young and short-lived democracy. But that pathway stands in sharp contrast to leadership change under the communist system, where there was no predetermined tenure or standardized way that Soviet leaders left power, making succession highly unpredictable. Russia's experience with leadership transition under the communist period is far more typical of authoritarian regimes. Most often, authoritarian rulers resist identifying successors out of fear that doing so might enable a competitor to establish a base of support that could be mobilized to remove them from office prematurely. A leader's advance announcement of a successor could also trigger an elite backlash against the selection. Many observers point to former Egyptian President Hosni

Mubarak's intention to have his son Gamal succeed him, for example, as a trigger for the elite unrest that ultimately paved the way for the 2011 revolution that unseated him when he was in his 80s. And in Zimbabwe, President Mugabe's perceived efforts to install his wife, Grace, as his successor led the military to step in and oust him after nearly 30 years in power.

So how might Putin seek to manage or be surprised by events that ultimately lead to his transition? Looking to Russia's own history can offer some clues about how Putin's transition might happen. The USSR saw eight leaders during its 69-year span. Among the less durable, two were ousted at the hands of elite insiders. The Presidium forced out Stalin's successor, Georgy Malenkov, in February 1955 after approximately two years in power. Nikita Khrushchev survived an attempted effort by rivals in the Politburo to oust him in 1957, only to be removed from power in a palace coup in 1964 after nine years in power. By contrast, the two longest serving leaders—Joseph Stalin (26 years in office) and Leonid Brezhnev (18 years in office)—died in office of natural causes.

This pattern is consistent with research by political scientist Milan Svoblik, who finds that the longer a leader remains in office, the less likely he is to be removed at the hands of insiders. This is because “the longer a dictator is in office, the more likely it is that he is an established rather than a contested autocrat and the less likely it is that he will be removed from office by his inner circle.”¹⁰ In other words, when longtime autocrats leave office, it tends not to be directly tied to insiders making moves.

Our research on longtime authoritarian leaders reaffirms this pattern—as leadership tenures progress, death in office (as opposed to forced overthrow) grows more common. In fact, death in office is the most frequent mode of exit among long-standing authoritarian leaders most like Putin (personalist leaders in power for twenty years or longer in the post-Cold War era); it accounts for 40 percent of cases. If we refine the sample to those longstanding personalist leaders that are age 65 or older (as Putin is), 50 percent die in office. Even if we broaden the sample to all leaders in power twenty years or longer in the post-Cold War era, death in office is still the most common form of exit at 31 percent.

After death in office, protest is the second most common way that longtime leaders exit office. In the post-Cold War era, revolts ousted 24 percent of longtime leaders. Of all *personalist* leaders in power for twenty years or longer in the post-Cold War era, 20 percent are ousted in protest. This is also consistent with the notion that longtime leaders most often leave in ways unrelated to their interaction with their inner circle—a category that includes protests (as with Libya's Moammar Gadhafi) and, although rare in the post-Cold War era, foreign occupation (as with Iraq's Saddam Hussein). That longtime personalists are ousted in protests is not surprising. Many longtime leaders, especially personalist leaders who lack access to good information thanks to the “yes men” they surround

themselves with, grow out of touch with their public and are prone to mistakes. If Putin's decision to wage war creates the groundwork for widescale protests in Russia that oust him, such a mode of overthrow would not be anomalous.

Finally, the historical pattern reveals that the longer a leader is in power, the less likely they are to be ousted in a coup (defined as cases in which the military or elite actors remove the leader, absent widescale mobilization). Of post-Cold War longtime leaders, 10 percent are ousted in coups. Coups are even less common in longtime, highly personalist regimes like Putin's Russia. Instead, in those settings, leaders are more likely to be ousted in a civil war (13 percent). That said, elite

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insiders are not entirely absent from the dynamics that serve to oust longtime leaders. Elite dynamics often factor into protests, as it is often visible signs of elite fissures that create a more permissive environment for protests to emerge, and it is ultimately the elite (typically the security actors) that either refuse to protect the leader from protests and/or step in to remove the leader once mass numbers of people have taken to the street.

If Putin does not remain in office until his natural death, it is likely that some combinations of elite dynamics and mass mobilization will contribute to his ouster. The data presented here suggest that it is unlikely that the elite would move to oust Putin absent significant citizen mobilization.

Key Factors to Watch

What factors make death in office more or less likely than a forced ouster? Our qualitative review of leadership transitions in cases most similar to Putin's Russia suggests that four factors are particularly influential for determining trajectories. We found that elite consensus about the use of repression was a key factor common across those cases where leaders died in office. Conversely, where leaders ultimately were forced out of power or resigned due to protests (or less frequently, coups), there were three common factors: high-level elite defections, some space for the opposition to take advantage of discontent, and declining influence of military/security actors in the inner circle. We discuss these factors and their prevalence in Russia at the time of writing in what follows.

Consensus about Repression

Elite consensus about the use of repression is the key factor common across those cases where longtime authoritarians die of natural causes in office. Our analysis

showed that regardless of whether the leader was ousted in a coup, protest, or died in office, levels of repression increase towards the end of longtime leaders' tenures. After decades in office, these leaders have few tools other than repression left to ensure their survival. Importantly, the data show that repression increased the most in those cases where leaders ultimately die in office. In other words, there appeared to be a broad consensus around the use of repression as a means to maintain power and secure the inner circle's access to the perks of power.

In some instances, our assessment about this consensus was based on the absence of observable signs of elite discontent in the face of routine regime repression. In other instances, however, elite consensus was more overt, such as when leaders successfully ratcheted up repression to quell discontent. In Uzbekistan, for example, Islam Karimov responded to the Andijan protests in 2005 with violence, demonstrating his willingness to use force and the security service's willingness to execute his orders. Likewise in Guinea, Lansana Conté fired on protesters in 2007, killing at least 30 people and injuring hundreds. Both leaders used repression to weather opposition to their rule, ultimately remaining in power until their deaths by natural causes.

Such consensus about the use of repression is not present in all authoritarian regimes. In many cases, divisions within the elite emerge amid disagreements over how much repression should be used to maintain power. Former Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington describes the destabilizing elite divisions that emerge between regime "hardliners," who defend the status quo, and "soft-liners," who prefer to pursue reform rather than repression to maintain the regime's survival.¹¹ Huntington wrote that soft-liners are not inherently pro-democracy, but may advocate for reform for several nonideological reasons, including because they view the costs of staying in power via repression as greater than the benefits and/or view the opposition as a credible threat and calculate that concessions to the opposition reduce the regime's risk of being overthrown. In other words, for a variety of reasons, it is not uncommon for the elite to be divided over the appropriate level of repression that should be deployed to maintain power.

In Russia, there appears to be broad consensus about the use of repression. Levels have increased since 2011–2012, when Putin returned to the presidency, and accelerated dramatically in the runup to the Duma election in September 2021 and especially in the wake of Putin's invasion. Even prior to the conflict, the Putin regime had gone to great lengths to crack down on Russian civil society, the political opposition, journalists, and the information environment. The decision to poison Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny underscores the apparent consensus that repression is the most prudent path to maintaining control. Likewise, the Russian government's decision to ban Memorial, the country's most important post-Soviet civic institution dedicated to the memory of

Stalinist repression and the defense of human rights, is reflective of this consensus. This increasingly repressive path has been noted by the Russian public; according to Levada Center polls in December 2021, 47 percent of Russians

The decision to poison Alexei Navalny underscores the apparent elite consensus on repression

reported fear of a return of mass repression and 53 percent expressed fears of the arbitrariness of the authorities, among the highest indicators witnessed since 1994.¹²

Conditions in Russia at the time of writing suggest that the regime is doubling down on repression to retain control. In the earliest days after the conflict, the Putin regime arrested protesters; banned the use of words like “invasion,” “attack,” or “war” in the media; shut down Echo Mosckvy, one of the oldest independent

radio stations; banned Twitter and Facebook inside Russia; and created new legislation calling for sentences of up to fifteen years in prison for people who distribute “false news” about the Russian military. These measures, if sustained, are therefore consistent with those in similar regimes elsewhere where leaders have gone on to govern until their death.

High-level Elite Defection

In those regimes where leaders were ousted from office, high-level elite defection was evident. In Burkina Faso, for example, elite cohesion began to fracture ahead of Blaise Compaoré’s resignation from office in 2014 amid widespread protests. In 2010, several Compaoré loyalists defected, including Zéphirin Diabré, a former regime stalwart who left the ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party and set up his own opposition party—the Union for Progress and Reform (UPC). UPC won nineteen seats in the 2012 legislative elections and became the largest opposition party.¹³ In addition to divisions within the political elite, there were also significant divisions in the country’s security forces starting in 2007, ultimately leading to protests among the police and army against the government in 2011 that evolved into a military mutiny.¹⁴ Indicators of elite fracture were also evident in cases such as the forced resignation of José Eduardo Dos Santos in Angola in 2017 and Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s failure to maintain control during mass protests in Algeria in 2019.

Up until Putin’s war in Ukraine, there were few observable signs of elite disgruntlement. Since the war, however, there have been increasing instances of elite criticism of Putin’s decision to wage war—dynamics that deviate from the norm in Russia. In addition to the actions of Abromovich (mentioned earlier),

the board of directors of Russia's largest private oil company, Lukoil, called for an end to the war with Ukraine. These and other signs hold potential to cascade and trigger defections from Putin's regime. Such visible indicators, along with what is sure to be more private elite discontent with Putin, suggest that even if the elite and/or security service don't come together to remove Putin, they might not come together to save him either, raising the likelihood that if protests should happen, they could be effective.

Opposition Space

In several cases where leaders were ousted from power, the regime granted (or lacked the capacity to close) political space that allowed the opposition to capitalize on discontent with the regime. In Gambia, for example, political space was a key factor in Yahya Jammeh's forced resignation. The main viable political opposition was the United Democratic Party, which was formed in 1996, but had never been united behind one person.¹⁵ That changed in 2016 when Jammeh, after ruling the Gambia for 22 years, lost the 2016 election to Adam Barrow, a real estate agent who did not initially intend to run for political office. The availability of political space to mount such opposition was a key ingredient in even allowing a longstanding incumbent to lose an election. Likewise in Burkina Faso, opposition parties were given sufficient space and were well-prepared to capitalize on opposition to Compaoré.

Such political space does not exist in Russia. Having watched the Color Revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan; the Arab Spring, during which protests unseated four of the world's longest standing autocrats; and the 2011–2012 protests in Russia, Putin has moved to "protest proof" his regime.¹⁶ Measures like the "foreign agents" laws and attacks on journalists, opposition, and internet freedoms have left diminishing space for Russians to vocalize discontent with the regime. Harsh crackdowns on anti-war protests at the time of writing suggest that Putin's strategy is likely to accelerate, undermining Russians' freedoms and erasing any last space in which civil society might function.

Whither the Military?

In some of the cases we examined, ousted leaders saw the influence of the military within the inner circle decline in the years preceding their departures. In Algeria, for example, there were indications that the regime sought to reduce the influence of the military. To illustrate, in 2014, a few months after Bouteflika was elected for his fourth term, he removed several civilian associates and senior military officers from government and military positions, including the president's defense adviser General Mohammed Touati, who was understood to be a military representative in the government. Touati's removal "was a sign that president

Bouteflika was pushing back against the influence of the military elite.”¹⁷ Moreover in 2018, turmoil between the elite and military services bubbled to the surface following an unprecedented number of arrests and dismissals of top generals and other members of the military and security forces, triggered by shifts in alliances in the military.¹⁸ Bouteflika, in other words, took steps to purge the military and concentrate control in his inner nonmilitary circle. These factors ultimately contributed to Bouteflika’s failure to maintain control during mass protests there in 2019.

Based on our observations, there is no indication that the influence of the security services is declining in Putin’s Russia. If anything, the *siloviki* continue to increase their power and influence within the regime. That said, the military’s performance in the war and the size of the costs it incurs could change these dynamics.

To summarize, the qualitative factors we examined suggest that Putin is most likely to ride out mounting dissent and eventually die in office. However, increasingly visible signs of elite dissatisfaction increase the potential that Putin could be forced out of office earlier than expected. Signs of elite discontent and the regime’s sustained commitment to the use of repression will be key to monitor in gauging Putin’s hold on power and whether or not he is likely to follow the most trodden path of staying in office until death by natural causes.

What Should We Expect Post-Putin?

The prospects of leadership change in longtime authoritarian regimes often breed optimism that conditions will improve after the leader’s departure. What should we expect of a post-Putin Russia? Does the United States have a Putin problem, meaning that Russia’s liberalizing trajectory can be realized once Putin is no longer in place to obstruct it?

To shed light on this question, we analyzed the prospects for democratization after the exit of a longtime authoritarian leader. Our data show that in the year following the exit of all leaders in power twenty years or longer in the post–Cold War era, most of the time the same authoritarian regime persists (45 percent) or a new authoritarian regime, with a new set of rules and base of support, emerges (31 percent). This means that democracy follows these leadership transitions in just 24 percent of cases. When we restrict the sample to those *personalist* leaders in power for twenty years or more, the prospects for democracy are even lower. In those cases, democracy emerges in just 20 percent of cases. When we narrow the sample one last time, to include *personalist* leaders aged 65 years or older at the time of exit and in power for twenty years or more, the prospects of democratization fall to just 8 percent of cases. The statistics do not meaningfully

change even when we extend the analysis to the five-year period after the leader's exit. Importantly, death in office does not improve the prospects for change; if anything, when authoritarians die in office, research shows the most likely outcome is regime continuity.¹⁹

The odds for democratization following these longtime authoritarian leaders are substantially lower than those following leaders that exit after they have been in power for less than twenty years, which stand at 48 percent. The difference in the propensity for democracy to emerge between longtime and less durable autocrats suggests that there is something different about longtime leaders. Their survival in the volatile world of authoritarian politics reveals that they are among the savviest and most skillful politicians. That said, the actions longtime leaders typically take to ensure control—such as hollowing out institutions, sidelining competent officials, and undermining civil society and any other center of power that could constrain their authority—by definition create barriers to the emergence of democracy. For these reasons, when longtime authoritarian leaders exit, the ground is often not fertile for democracy to take root. This is not to suggest that Russia will not democratize in the post-Putin era, but that such transitions are less likely than the persistence of authoritarianism.

Odds for democratization following these longtime authoritarian leaders are substantially lower

Though authoritarianism typically continues when authoritarian leaders exit, one positive note is that repressive conditions tend to ease in the five-year period afterwards. Indeed, Russia has experienced such cycles in levels of repression. After Stalin, there was liberalization under Khrushchev. That liberalization was reversed under Brezhnev, but the repressive period under his rule gave way to liberalization once again under Gorbachev and then Yeltsin. It is worth noting that the observed improvement in repression in the comparative sample is most pronounced when the outgoing leader had governed for twenty years or more, and even more so when such leaders are personalist. This may reflect a reversion to the norm, given the increase in repression that tends to occur as such leaders' tenures progress—which we referred to above.

What Should Policy toward Russia Assume?

The analysis we present here provides some insight into how political change in Putin's Russia could unfold. Moreover, research shows that how Putin exits office is likely to shape the trajectory of post-Putin Russia. Death in office—the most

common form of exit among leaders most comparable to Putin—would be most likely to usher in a leader from within the ruling elite, allowing the same authoritarian regime to persist. When leaders die in office, there is strong incentive for the elite to identify a consensus candidate, someone who can guarantee their continued access to the perks of power.²⁰ The same would be true if Russia's elite move against Putin and push him out of office. In this case, the same regime would most likely remain intact after Putin, albeit with a new leader at the top. If Putin exits in these ways, there would likely be a degree of continuity in Russian foreign policy because the broad contours of Russian foreign policy, such as Russia's drive for great power status and desire to usher in a more multipolar world order, are widely held by the elite (as well as by the Russian public). A new leader may be willing to reverse course in Ukraine in return for sanctions relief and a new personality could alter the tone of Russian foreign policy, creating opportunities for change at the margins. But the broad contours of Russian foreign policy, and therefore sustained confrontation with the United States, would likely persist.

There would be greater prospects for change should protests—the second most common form of leader exit in regimes most like Putin's—precipitate Putin's departure. In this scenario, protests would be likely to result in greater turnover

There would be greater prospects for change should protests precipitate Putin's departure

among the ruling elite, and thus greater potential for more substantial change in Russian foreign policy. Even then, however, vexing problems—the war with Ukraine and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea—will complicate relations with the United States and Europe. Moreover, there are questions about how the impact of sanctions will affect Russians' views of the United States, as Putin portrays Washington and European capitals as respon-

sible for the economic hardship that the sanctions produce. US and European policymakers will need to communicate to Russians that Western actions are targeted not at Russia but at the Putin regime, such that negative sentiment toward the United States and Europe do not become barriers to better relations with a post-Putin Russia.

In addition to shaping expectations for future relations with Russia, understanding how leadership transitions play out in other contexts can help inform productive policy approaches to Russia. This is particularly pertinent with respect to the severity of sanctions levied on Russia in response to Putin's decision to wage war. The analysis presented here suggests that such an aggressive approach to sanctioning individuals around Putin could raise the prospects of a less violent transition in Russia. In other words, by sanctioning individuals

around Putin, the West may be able to weaken elite bonds to Putin such that members of the elite would be less likely to support the use of force in the face of protests and even defect from the regime should they sense impending political change, although this requires that greater efforts must be made to clearly specify how such sanctions can be lifted and to increase the credibility that they can be. Sanctioning individuals around Putin will not lead them to pressure Putin to change Kremlin behavior, and in the near term may even draw individuals closer to Putin. But by sanctioning individuals around Putin, and their families, Washington could raise questions in the minds of the elite about the direction that Putin is taking Russia and make stark the choice that such individuals face should Russians themselves take to the streets to demand change.

Similarly, this understanding of political dynamics in longtime autocracies suggests that Washington and its allies and partners are right to prioritize anti-corruption in their Russia policy and must double down on doing so in the future. Our analysis showed that the regimes of longtime authoritarian leaders like Putin are most likely to persist or be followed by a new form of authoritarianism in the wake of the leader's departure. Such continuity arises because the survival strategies these longtime personalist leaders pursue create conditions that are unfavorable to democracy. Here, corruption plays a role. Personalist regimes are the most corrupt type of authoritarian regime. Corrupt and illicit networks entrench regime interests and create high barriers to individuals outside the regime from gaining influence within the system. In this way, corruption facilitates the persistence of authoritarianism after a longtime leader's departure. Doubling down on anti-corruption—including by effectively enforcing sanctions on corrupt oligarchs and tracking their assets down, stepping up efforts to fight money-laundering, reform campaign finance, enhancing transparency of the financial and real estate markets, and increasing funding for investigative journalism—can weaken the structural support for authoritarianism in Russia and thereby create opportunities for political change in a post-Putin era.

In addition to prioritizing anti-corruption efforts, the United States and its allies should step up support for Russian civil society—a key ingredient needed to sustain a more liberal and democratic Russia. Critically, Western actions can help Russian civil society actors to sustain their work in the face of the Kremlin's crackdown. In particular, large numbers of the opposition, journalists, and other Russian civil society actors have been forced to leave the country, creating new opportunities to support their work from outside Russia. Much can be done, for example, to support journalists that now operate outside Russia including

Doubling down on anti-corruption can create opportunities for political change post-Putin

through visa support, fellowships, increased funding, and legal assistance. Such efforts are needed now more than ever and would make for a valuable investment in a better relationship with a future, post-Putin Russia.

Now What?

Putin's longtime reign over Russia and his turn towards a darker, more extreme, and destructive form of authoritarianism have generated questions regarding what the future of Russia will look like. Such questions are not unique to Russia. Similar questions have emerged over the futures of Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko, Cambodia under Hun Sen, Uganda under Yoweri Museveni, and Iran under Ayatollah Khamenei.

The records of their post–Cold War contemporaries can shed light on the nature of the most trodden pathways. Recent history suggests that older, longtime personalist authoritarians usually die in office and democracy is unlikely to follow. The regime they govern typically survives their departure or is succeeded by a new authoritarian regime, and while their prospects (in the near term at least) for democratization are generally dim, repression may ease for a time. Such longtime leaders have proven to be masters of the uncertain authoritarian political landscape, surviving in power despite constant threats to their rule. As such, the environments they leave in their wake are often void of the typical founding blocks of a healthy democracy, such as institutional checks on the executive, well-organized political parties that can challenge incumbents, and a vibrant civil society.

Whether their successors will likewise prove to be so skillful is likely critical to the long-term political stability of the regimes they leave behind. In many instances, their successors have proven to be less talented. Though there are not many post–Cold War cases of this to draw inferences from, it is noteworthy that many successors of personalist leaders seem less adept at establishing control, as recent domestic unrest in Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro and Cuba under Miguel Díaz-Canel suggests.

Putin's war in Ukraine adds great uncertainty about whether Russia will follow this most trodden path. In deciding to wage war, Putin may have created opportunities for political change that would not otherwise exist. It has become a common refrain to say that Putin's actions have brought about the very outcomes he sought to avoid—revitalizing NATO and strengthening transatlantic relations, for example. We can now hope that the same will be true in Russia's domestic politics.

Notes

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