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Putin After 2024: More Power or More Predictability?

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Putin's recent constitutional proposals have laid the basis for a post-Putin era of stability, and above all, predictability in the political system. They also pointed to his probable successor after his current term ends in 2024, while he plays a likely elder statesman role.

COMMENTARY

ALTHOUGH HIS overall popularity remains high, support for President Vladimir Putin in the last few years and months has declined, thanks to the state of the economy and falling living standards. Russia's economy has not been growing fast enough. In 2019, growth was at 1.3%; in 2020, it is projected to be 1.8%. Structural challenges, a conservative policy of macro-economic stability as well as Western sanctions have acted as brakes on higher growth rates.

The resultant politico-social unrest, seen in 2018 and 2019, has stimulated Putin's need to act fast on the political front. It is in this context that his recent constitutional proposals should be seen. They were not only to arrest the decline in his popularity but more so to introduce stability and especially, predictability into the post-Putin era and with that, secure his legacy for posterity.

Planning for Political Changes

In a nutshell, his proposals call for granting more power to the Duma and the State Council (currently an advisory body) and introducing a two-term presidency. They also include the need for Russian law to prevail over international law and treaties and finally, to limit high political and civil service offices to Russian citizens only who do not have permanent residency or another citizenship.

The Duma expectedly approved the proposals in a first reading a week after his speech; no opposition is expected from the Upper House as well.

However, Putin has made it plain that the proposals must be approved in a national vote before he appends his signature to the proposals.

It is noteworthy that they were submitted long before the September 2021 Duma elections. Dominated by the pro-government and pro-Putin United Russia (UR), which faces loyal opposition from the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic party and Just Russia party, President Putin cannot assume that this political constellation will hold after September 2021, in the light of social and political discontent with UR.

Hence, the proposals can be seen as an attempt to address the concerns and dissatisfaction of growing numbers of the electorate with the perceived lack of political discourse and freedom.

Widespread Apathy

The absence of mass demonstrations against the proposals suggests that there is likely to be no serious street or “non-systemic opposition”, meaning political forces outside the parliamentary system.

Thus far, the only sign of a planned protest by the non-systemic opposition is a scheduled demonstration at the end of February, to mark the fifth anniversary of the killing of Boris Nemtsov, a liberal politician. Expressions of opposition to the proposals are expected at this planned event.

Political apathy and largely disillusionment with the absence of real change after past demonstrations only partly explain this phenomenon. Of note is the fact that the youth of Russia today have known only Putin as president and have grown up under relatively prosperous and stable circumstances, unlike their parents and grandparents.

It is therefore not a surprise that a recent survey by VTSIOM, a state pollster, revealed that a majority of respondents (79%) consider the proposals “rather important”.

New PM's Key Task

About half the members of the Cabinet is from the previous government; the new members are younger individuals with proven technocratic experience and qualifications as well as administrative skills. The new prime minister Mikhail Mishutin is known as a capable technocrat who established a well-run tax service.

The overriding task of his government is to fully and successfully implement the National Projects (NPs), Putin's ambitious US\$400 billion programme to stimulate the economy and in the process, raise living standards.

Former prime minister Dmitry Medvedev was seen to have failed to implement the NPs fast enough. Accomplishment of these objectives would cement Putin's legacy as post-Soviet Russia's longest-serving president.

He would be seen as the leader who brought stability and prosperity after the chaos in the aftermath of the USSR's collapse and who laid the foundation of a stronger economy in a stable and predictable political system after 2024. Announced in May 2018 by him, the NPs are to be implemented by the end of his term of office in 2024.

Veteran foreign minister Sergei Lavrov retained his post, a clear sign that there would be continuity in foreign policy.

Probable Successor

Mishutin was chosen by Putin to be prime minister in a very calculated move and is his probable successor for the following reasons:

First, he has the technocratic credentials to fully and successfully implement the NPs as well as raise the economic growth rates; so do the new and current members of his Cabinet. His fluency in the English language could not but be noticed by Putin.

Such a facility would mean easier access and direct communication with the United States, regarded as the most important country (despite oft-repeated protestations of close and vital links with China) and "main opponent" of Russia.

Second, Mishutin does not have any known links to Russia's powerful interest groups such as the *siloviki* or top security establishment officials and heads of powerful state corporations. Hence, Putin need not balance the interests of these groups; were he a member of either of them, Putin would have to spend political capital and time on such a task.

Moreover, Mishutin would not be seen as "old wine in a new bottle" by the electorate. In this regard, he fits the bill of having new faces at the helm of power.

Fourth, being a political unknown without any expressed political ambitions, he is not considered a threat by either Putin or the powerful interest groups. In that regard, Putin would be more at ease handing over power to Mishutin.

Elder Statesman?

Earlier speculation that Putin might assume the leadership of a restructured State Council with extensive powers has thus far proved groundless.

Nevertheless, it is quite certain that he does not intend to remain in office till his death, as had been the case in the Soviet era. He made this clear to World War II veterans in St Petersburg just three days after his State-of-the-Nation speech in which he outlined his constitutional proposals.

A few days later, he pointed out that a role like that of the late Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, "is not applicable to Russia" as it "would undermine the institution of the presidency," insisting that Russia must remain a "strong presidential republic".

Latest media reports that a government commission has proposed the title of "Supreme Leader" for the position of head of state, have further added to all the

speculation about his political future after 2024. His spokesman, Dmitry Peskov was reported to have said that the president had no view on the proposal.

There is, nevertheless, no doubt that he would assume a role after he steps down from power. Only the form, structure and extent of that role's powers remain to be seen.

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