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[Putin Aeterna?](#)



Back in February, 2004, a month before his second presidential election, Vladimir Putin was asked about the limits of presidential terms. He [answered](#) that if anyone works seven years full-time, they would go crazy.

More than a decade later, in December, 2017, President Putin announced his participation in the next round of presidential elections. Victory at the polls would mean Putin could remain in the presidency until 2024 — marking a quarter of a century in the upper echelons of Russian politics.

After that point, Russian law would technically rule out another term for Putin.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that 2024 is a very conditional point of the supposed end of Putin's power in Russia. First, no one excludes the possibility of its termination earlier, whether for health reasons or as a result of another arrangement that makes his continued rule untenable. Secondly, it is impossible to exclude a more likely option, the continuation of Putin's rule after 2024: he will be only 72 years old (for instance, Robert Mugabe was removed from power at the age of 93). And there are many ways to reshape Russian institutions to grant him further responsibility that could well last for life, whether in the form of a State Council or a parliamentary republic with an eternal prime minister or Chancellor, say, not unlike Angela Merkel in Germany.

In any case, the entire political elite of Russia, as well as of the West and throughout Asia, proceed from a shared assumption: Putin, unambiguously, will win the elections of 2018 and will remain in power, at least until 2024. This political longevity is the norm in Russian history and places Vladimir Vladimirovich on par with Alexander II (26 years in power), Alexander I (24) and Nikolai II (23). Of course, Josef Stalin (31 years), Catherine II (34 years) and Peter I (36 years) are still far away. If we proceed from the imperial and totalitarian traditions, then in 2024 Putin will not even come close to the maximum limits of the historical rule of the most memorable Russian leaders, whose end as usual was their natural death or a murder. Let's not get ahead of ourselves: Putin is already in power for 18 years. The period of Medvedev's presidency, for objective reasons, does not cancel Putin's role as the main decision-maker in the country, moreover, Medvedev himself did not really argue with this.

Even in Russia's so-called "near abroad", such a political longevity is not unique. Nursultan Nazarbayev has been in power since 1984, Emomali Rahmon since 1992, Alexander Lukashenko since 1994, Islam Karimov, who had recently passed away, ruled since 1990. Examples of even greater political longevity in Asia, Africa and Latin America are there for all to see.

On the other hand, if we compare Putin's rule with the experience of democratic countries, then only Chancellor Merkel, who has been in power since 2005, is comparable. It is worth acknowledging, though, that the prospects for her continuing rule is not that clear cut. During the reign of Putin, four American presidents, four French presidents and four prime ministers of Great Britain have already changed.

Putin is the most senior among the leaders of the BRICS countries. In India, during the Putin era, three prime ministers have already been replaced, undemocratic China has changed three presidents of the PRC, four Brazilian presidents and three South African presidents have been replaced. Moreover, even if you look at the G20, the most representative club of global powers, it turns out that Putin is the most irremovable one. Even in case of kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Putin has witnessed a change of the monarch due to natural reasons just a couple of years ago. In the G20 countries (minus the EU) the executive power has been replaced on average 4.3 times over the past 18 years, despite the fact that not all of these countries are democratic in the strict canonical sense of the word. If you add 6 more years of Putin's rule, the proportion will increase to almost 6 rotations of power on average during Putin's tenure in power.

All this means only one thing: now is the perfect occasion to think about what to do next. It makes no sense to wait until March 2018, when Putin will be officially re-elected for another term.

Question for the West

The countries of the West, which over the last few years declared the need to fight / deter / change Putin's Russia, have not yet developed an obvious strategy for relations with Russia. Almost 4 years have passed since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. But that has not been enough time to establish that Putin has not changed his foreign policy course in response to Western opprobrium. Instead, he has doubled down (whether in Ukraine, Syria, or during the elections in the countries of the West). He has proved unwilling to refuse confrontation due to economic difficulties, sanctions and low energy prices. A number of attempts "to return Russia to dialogue" or to set up a new "business as usual" turned out to be a failure, although even in theory they could have not brought the desired result anyway.

The Kremlin, for its part, clearly and repeatedly formulated conditions for ending the so-called Cold War 2.0, the essence of which is reduced to new agreements on what is politically permissible for Russia in the countries of the former Soviet Union, agreements on joint global projects to combat terrorism (in Syria and elsewhere, for instance in North Korea), as well as the new rules governing the post-American world, the so-called multipolarity. But, given that the West consistently refuses such proposals, a number of questions arise that need to be answered in the near future:

Deterrence of Russia

Is the policy of deterrence — via sanctions and other methods — a long-term strategy? If so, is the current level of pressure enough to contain the Kremlin? If not, what other tools can be used to minimize unwanted behavior on the part of Russia in the next six years?

Support of the Eastern Partnership countries

Is the current level of support for the six Eastern Partnership countries — Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus — sufficient to minimize the risks of failure of democratic reforms? If not, what else does the West have to offer (or require) from the Eastern Partnership countries to increase the chances of a successful transformation and minimize the chances of a rollback of democratic norms?

The fight against the Kremlin propaganda and the support of the civil society of the Eastern Partnership countries and Russia

Is the chosen model of the fight against the Kremlin's propaganda techniques currently successful? If not, what methods should be modified, which should be eliminated and which ones should be added? Is it possible to recognize the level of development of civil society in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Russia as satisfactory? If not, how else can we support civil society (or its remnants when speaking of Russia), in the conditions of consistent deterioration of political and legal environment in which they work? Is it necessary to support more actively Russian NGOs and educational projects that exist in temporary emigration?

This incomplete list of issues requires detailed consideration and active discussion. Again, there is no point in waiting for March 2018 to state that Putin's regime will last at least 6 more years, and the challenges that have been formulated in the last few years will not disappear. Without a clear and active policy from Washington, Brussels and Berlin, it is impossible to imagine that in 6 years of Putin's 4th term, the Eastern European region will be more democratic and more developed than it is today. Quite the contrary.

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