The 2008 Succession: Fact or Fiction?

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On March 18, 1991, a referendum calling for the creation of the post of President of Russia was conducted throughout the RSFSR. The election was scheduled for June 12, 1991—candidates had to be registered (and approved) by 21 May, a mere three weeks before the election was to be held. It was a remarkably smooth election, given its fraught topic: the creation of an elected position that represented an alternative to the Soviet center. With such short notice, the public associations and broad plank movements (e.g., The Interregional Group of Deputies or The Democratic Platform) had to build from the renown of individuals, rather than build up from regional roots and spawn a candidate to challenge the authorities. A robust Boris Yel'tsin famously won the race and his victory carried with it much of the zeitgeist for revolution and change (as expressed through the new and newly-invigorated media outlets). A shaky coup, a meeting in the forest and an economic tug of war later and the Soviet Union collapsed as Russia, a Russia vehemently defined as distinct from the stagnant Soviet center, emerged to claim the Soviet mantle on the international arena and promised shock therapy to restart the disintegrating Soviet command economy.

In another century, but not yet fifteen years later, a struggle to establish succession for the next Russian presidential elections begins nearly three years before the actual election. The media, heavily state-influenced, chirp about the possible contenders for heir to the Kremlin hot seat. The focus of debate, such as it is, betokens a return to stability and executive strength as opposed to the chaotic clamor to throw off the lethargic center's yoke that typified the Soviet to Russian transition, particularly in the economic sector: The choice between shock therapy and the 500 day path to the market have long passed in favor of debate over how to prolong superpower status as
an energy exporter and how to regain state control of key economic sectors. One thing is clear from the strikingly early succession struggle: the successor candidates that pop up now are unlikely to have staying power through 2008.

Putin came to power through an intricate, and if credit is given where due, remarkably well-executed "Operation Successor" on the part of the Family around Yel'tsin. The stakes were substantial for the Yel'tsin clan, with an unstable political field threatening the liberty and safety of the first Russian President's Family and with no tradition of legitimate succession to provide a framework of stability. A wobbly and malleable judicial code, a fudged constitutional referendum with "consensus constitutional order," (1) and a broad array of questionable economic practices all undermined the security of the Family. Putin provided a key element of loyalty and security that allowed the Yel'tsin succession to proceed.

The contours of the agreement between Yel'tsin, his Family and his successor seem clear: the safety and security of the Family and the protection of at least part of the "Yel'tsin legacy" in exchange for the presidency.

Putin has proven himself loyal as regards the majority of the Yel'tsin Family; while few of them remain in office, even fewer sit in jail. A notable exception to the agreement would seem to be Boris Abramovich Berezovsky, who needed to seek political asylum to avoid a Russian prison sentence. It is not difficult to imagine that Putin consulted with other Family members and that they no longer felt obliged to protect Berezovsky (indeed, many might have been pleased to see him threatened), before proceeding against him. It is also clear that the need to consult would have been a characteristic of Putin's first term, less so his second. The move again Mikhail Khodorkovsky, over the objections of a stalwart Family insider, Aleksandr Voloshin, marked a turning point in Putin's relations with his previous patrons. So warned, few among the Family members currently waver in their support of the president, and those that briefly did (e.g., Anatoli Chubais, who toyed with supporting the presidential candidacy of Mikhail Kasianov) were quickly, and effectively, warned off.
Boris Yeltsin began his Presidency, and in particular his rule of a resurgent Russian center, with a strong mandate for economic reform. His "Young Turks" government, formed in November 1991, featured economist Yegor Gaidar, "Russia First" theorist Gennadi Burbulis, legal reformer Sergei Shakhrai, and of course, privatization Tsar, Anatoli Chubais. Much of the Yeltsin presidency was marked by a sense of the need to protect "his reformers" along with their market and privatization programs. The excesses of the reformers (and/or those who took advantage of them) were mirrored by the excesses of a president in decline and constituted the cost of the transition—a chaotic, destructive price that, by the time of Putin's ascent to the Kremlin, was perceived as devastating to Russia and its population.

Putin has managed both to be the trustworthy heir and the anti-Yeltsin simultaneously. He rarely criticizes his predecessor (although those occasions have become somewhat more frequent in his second term), he is generally sober and dignified in his interactions, particularly with foreign leaders, and his policies are consistent without the frequent personnel shake-ups that marked the Yeltsin era. Putin's economic team, is drawn primarily from the ranks of the western-oriented liberal reformers, who trained with, are tied to, or were promoted by members of later Yeltsin governments. (2) Putin has not broken faith with the Yeltsin economic legacy; he has embraced the reforms (albeit with a different form of apparat control) and created room for them to take root and expand. As has been noted repeatedly, he has benefited from the strength of oil and gas prices worldwide: they have allowed Putin's governments—led by Kasianov and then by Fradkov—the buffer to stabilize other programs and even attempt (although not necessarily successfully) privatization of some social benefits.

Foreign policy is the one area where Russia has had the most difficulty finding its voice. In its relations with the independent states of the former Soviet Union, Russia has wavered from indifference and neglect to cooperation and alliance with sympathetic regimes, from maladroit interference in strategic states to effective sabotage of the aggressively independent regimes. With the west, and the United States in particular, both Yeltsin and Putin experienced ebbs and flows in the construction of some form of
partnership (Constructive? Strategic? Selective?). After the momentous collapse of the Soviet Union and the release of ideological moorings, Russia's relations with the west have been buffeted by shifts in American administrations and policies, terrorist attacks, at home and abroad, homegrown revanchists and the rollercoaster of international and UN politics. The Middle East, India and China all have witnessed fluctuations in Russian policy as various key personnel struggle to establish themselves with a blueprint for relations, or to use arms sales as campaign slush funds, or to invite well-connected "old hands" (such as Yevgeni Primakov) back into the inner circle as advisers. In periods like the present, when succession stalks every policy initiative, the question of who promotes a particular policy is as crucial as the details of the policy itself.

There is one legacy for Putin to leave as the calling card of his presidency: stability—economic, political and military. (Territorial stability, specifically in Chechnya, still seems a distant goal for Putin, despite the terrible price already paid in war.) What is required to foster and to embed this legacy is the creation of a constitutional mechanism, not just to outline term limits for the presidency but to determine the ground rules for succession. The 2008 succession is by no means guaranteed; it should be.

Absent death or dotage (and obviously the latter was not an automatic cause for removal), will the legal mechanisms of the constitution be enough impetus to force a succession? Putin has, on several occasions, stated his intention not to amend the constitution, but to follow its mandate for presidential term limits. Unfortunately, the weight of Russian history stands against this claim: never before has a young, vital Russian leader simply walked away from the Kremlin voluntarily. (3)

If Putin follows through and leaves the Kremlin in 2008, then finding a successor would have to be foremost on his mind, and perhaps more urgently, on the minds of those around him. Putin's Kremlin is far more opaque than was Yel'tsin's. Any personnel moves conducted by the President at this point are grist for the successor mill: hence the shifting responsibilities for Dmitri Medvedev and Sergei Ivanov indicate that they are early leaders in the speculative presidential polls. The downside of naming a successor
cannot be overstated: Putin cannot exist at the Kremlin with a replacement down the hall...at least not for very long.

Kremlin watchers and media analysts list the names of the current circles around Putin. His meeting schedule and the regular attendees are scrutinized for potential heirs. (4) Putin must realize however, that for "Operation Successor" to succeed a second time would require a remarkable constellation of forces. His successor would need to be entirely beholden in his position to the outgoing regime. That criterion alone shakes loose most of the current Kremlin denizens who have developed strong patronage tails in business (on the Gazprom Board of Directors, for instance) or in potent sectors, such as defense or the security services—unless, of course there is sufficient kompromat to keep a successor in line. As Putin well knows, even the scent of the most horrific scandal can be managed from the Kremlin, and the Kremlin's "political technologists" are constantly improving their spinning techniques.

Despite the poll numbers demonstrating the relative favor of each potential successor (which provide more information about the discerning eye for political intrigue on the part of the Russian populace than about the luminary's likelihood to inherit the Kremlin), the current array of contenders to Putin's office are, if nothing else, peaking far too soon in the political season.

The dark doubt that shadows all talk of Russian succession, of course, is the possibility that Putin simply will not leave. Despite numerous denials of his intention to amend the constitutional term limits, Putin's clearest option would seem to be to stay in office—particularly if a threat to Russian society developed. (Fears of a red-brown or nationalist-fascist coalition seem to increase as critical elections draw near. Yel'tsin's staff certainly stoked the anti-communist flames in the run-up to the 1996 election, and there is some evidence that Putin's staff would easily tread a similar path.) The development of youth movements, which were created in Kremlin corridors and focus specifically on the person of Putin as leader, is a disquieting factor in the question of succession. While the creation of some of these movements appeared as a response to
the perceived threats of the Rose, Orange and Tulip revolutions, with their young 
protestors—often university students—capable of continuing their protests indefinitely, 
Russian youth groups, such as Nashi, seem to embody their own shadowy threat of 
violence, perhaps as dangerous as the fascist threat.

The threat of social discord might play well enough abroad to allow Putin to remain in 
the presidential office indefinitely, but it introduces a series of risk factors that make it a 
difficult scenario to predict: Obviously, there is the possibility of actually unleashing an 
uncontrollable fascist movement where there once was none. Such violent political 
forces can be unpredictable and form a shaky foundation for a succession scheme. 
Less violent, but equally unpredictable, is the possibility of an entirely new American 
administration. The threat of expulsion from international organizations and agreements 
(goodbye WTO—if accession has occurred by then) could force Putin to back down and 
leave him in a much more difficult situation than if he simply had planned a smarter 
scenario in the first place.

A more elaborate scheme for succession involves the reconstruction of the Russian 
state from a super-presidential system of governance to the strong Prime Minister-
driven parliamentary style. Putin would abandon the presidency, but remain at the 
executive helm, albeit from Belyi dom rather than the Kremlin. This is an oddly attractive 
theory, if only given its inherent irony. The constitution still would require "adjustment," 
but those alterations would be to create a "more broadly representative" form of 
government. Putin's legacy would be not only the creation of stability out of chaos, but 
the transformation of Russian governance from the "strong fist" executive mode to the 
seemingly more representative parliamentary system. The main problem with this 
scheme is that it requires a curtailing of presidential power—particularly the power of 
decree, and it would be unseemly for the former president to be the axe-wielder on the 
prerogatives of his successor.

The demarcation of executive authority between the president and the Council of 
Ministers, specifically the prime minister might best be left to the Constitutional Court.
The seeds of this notion were originally promoted in 1992-93 by Congress of People’s Deputies Presidium Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov (who attempted, colorfully, to turn Yel’tsin into the "Queen of England" through this revision of executive-legislative relations). Khasbulatov’s cohort in this endeavor was then Chairman of the Constitutional Court, Valeri Zorkin. Conveniently enough, Zorkin once again heads up the Constitutional Court, and met with President Putin recently, after which at least one analyst considered the notion of Putin as Head of the Court: "It is difficult to think of a more effective way of nurturing an independent judiciary and a real rule-of-law state than the installation of Vladimir Putin as Chairman of the Russian Constitutional Court." (5)

In order for this scenario to proceed, Putin, as Prime Minister, would need a trusted associate perhaps even a fellow St. Petersburger, to help him transform the path of Russia’s transitional development. Perhaps a dedicated loyalist, one who designed Putin’s ambitious, early initiatives for judicial reform could take the bench when Putin left the Kremlin. Dmitri Kozak, the über-reformer of Putin’s first term who was sent to the Caucasus after Beslan (perhaps at the behest of an envious Kremlin colleague) would seem an ideal candidate to head the constitutional court to complete this scenario. But could Putin trust him to make the right decisions?

The problem with all such succession conjecture is that the issue of trust, the most valuable commodity at such a moment, is also the most scarce. It reinforces the need for an established and agreed, transparent method of transition to confer legitimacy. Russia has suffered for its absence, perhaps Putin will have a hand in setting the practice aright.

End Notes
1) The May 1994 signing of the Civic Accord established an arrangement whereby the Russian President, Government Federal Assembly, constituent parts of the Federation and public associations, among other signatories to the Accord, agreed that the "Russian Federation constitution in force [is] the foundation of Russian legal statehood."

3) Mikhail Gorbachev, as Soviet President, certainly did not leave voluntarily, but he can be applauded for not forcing a violent showdown with Yel'tsin. Prior to that, the rumored wanderings of Alexander I through the Crimea are as close a precedent in Russian history as can be found (and Oh, the uprising that his reported death sparked!).


5) "President Putin Eyes a Constitutional Role," by Sergei Shilov, 17 Mar 06, Moscow News via Lexis-Nexis.