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## **Kremlin Roulette: Preparing for the Post-Putin Russian Leadership**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

After a series of revisions to the country's constitution and several decades of strategically consolidating power in the political system, Russian President Vladimir Putin has the potential to remain in power until at least 2036. President Putin's departure from power could have serious implications for the stability of the Russian Federation and future relations between Russia and the Western powers, particularly the United States. When President Putin leaves power, how, and who will succeed him could have drastic impacts not only on Russia's domestic politics but also Russia's foreign relations. At the present moment, he faces little internal opposition and there are virtually no presidential candidates that are likely to defeat him in the upcoming 2024 election. Many Western leaders look forward to the day that Putin leaves office, ideally after a humiliating defeat in the war in Ukraine. However, it is strategically unwise to base future U.S.-Russian relations on the ouster of Putin and hope that liberal democracy will magically take root in the ashes of Putin's reign. There are a variety of issues that will not simply vanish into thin air because of new management.

If it wishes to be prepared for even the worst case-scenario and come out on top, the United States must have a game plan - a series of game plans, if need be - for the inevitable departure of President Putin. Doing so will better acquaint U.S. analysts and policymakers with the actors and players in Putin's Russia, specifically who they are, and what their politics are. Furthermore, the United States must be prepared for the countless scenarios of President Putin's departure which can easily influence the direction of Russia and its relations with the world. While there is a chance that Putin's regime could collapse within a few years after losing in Ukraine and facing growing pressure at home, chances are not assurances. And considering that there are political forces in Moscow more nationalistic, militaristic, and anti-Western than Putin, what leads him to cease being President of Russia is just as crucial as to when he departs. Mindful of these scenarios, the United States will be able to comfortably face a dark and unpredictable future with the Russian Federation.

This paper will make the case for why the United States should invest more resources and training in the sector of Russian studies, with a particular focus on Kremlinology. Despite all the challenges and setbacks facing him and his regime, many Russian scholars do not see President Putin going anywhere anytime soon, but that is not to say that he could not depart at any given time due to a variety of factors. Regardless, Putin is not immortal and one day he will leave office. The questions are when, how, and, perhaps most importantly, who could be next?

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section is an examination of Putin and, just as important, his associates. The section will provide information on the people who have been with him over the years and who is with him now in order to identify trends and patterns as to who has made it into his exclusive circle and what changes may be underway that could affect future selections.

The second section lays out the series of scenarios for President Putin's eventual departure with a specific focus given to certain time frames of his departure. Although not all factors can be included in this section - the number of scenarios and factors can easily reach book lengths - some of the most probable and impactful scenarios, factors, and timeframes will be.

The third section describes the potential impacts of the scenarios for departure on America's global agenda and how future relations with the Russian Federation could be molded by the potential outcomes.

Additionally, the final section will prescribe a series of steps the United States can take to prepare for the various outcomes, namely by investing training and funding for the next generation of Russian scholars and specialists.

## **Section I: Putin - The Man and his People**

A relatively unknown individual when he first became President of the Russian Federation in 2000 after serving as the Prime Minister to President Boris Yelstin, Vladimir Putin is now at the center of a web of power in the Russian Federation. In *The Code of Putinism*, Brian Taylor writes that Vladimir Putin is a man with a set of beliefs and values shared by him and members of his team, hence the "code of Putinism." By "code" Taylor means Putin is motivated by ideas, habits and emotions in addition to rational self-interest.<sup>1</sup>

This code of mentality and behavior is not limited to Putin himself but also applies to other people - his people. According to Taylor, the way Putin and his team behave and think have shaped aspects of Russia

itself, as he says that it is "misruled" as one result.<sup>2</sup>

Taylor describes Putin not only as the President of the Russian Federation but also a "boss of the informal network state."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Putin has the burden of not only being the head of a state but also the leader of a web of friendships, alliances, and collaborations with various actors that empower his rule and whom he, in turn, empowers. Many of Putin's friends and allies were formed thanks in part to his education at Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) State University in the law school and his time as an officer in the Committee of State Security, or the KGB.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Making of a Boss**

After serving in the KGB until the end of the Cold War, Putin managed to find a job in the law school of his alma mater, where close friends put him in touch with the city's mayor, Anatoliy Sobchak. He pivoted to working in the mayor's office, then briefly served as deputy mayor, and gradually ascended a ladder to being selected to run the Federal Security Service, or FSB, the KGB's successor.<sup>5</sup> After a short time serving as the leader of the FSB, Putin was tapped to serve in President Boris Yeltsin's cabinet as a deputy prime minister. It was not long before Yeltsin promoted Putin to Prime Minister of Russia in 1999 and in less than a year, facing mounting criticism and scandal, Yeltsin stepped down from office and Putin was designated his successor.<sup>6</sup>

How did Valdimir Putin, a relative unknown in the 1990s, rise to become the President of the Russian Federation within a decade? The answer lies in connections and friendships. Politics everywhere is a game of who-knows-who, but in Russia this was especially the case in the unstable decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin was able to utilize his series of connections from the city of Saint Petersburg, his old alma mater, and former members of the KGB to rise through the ranks. Some of his current cabinet ministers and close allies have known him for decades, and quite a few have been with him since the beginning of his slow rise to power.

One key group of people in Putin's inner circle are members of his Saint Petersburg group, including Dmitry Medvedev, Sergei Ivanov, Valentina Matviyenko, Sergey Naryshkin, and countless others.<sup>7</sup>

These individuals have served as Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister, or have served in key roles in the Duma (the legislature) or key agencies in the Russian government.<sup>8</sup> Many of these people are still in Putin's inner circle, although, as this paper will illustrate later, there have been some modifications.

Another group of people includes former members of the KGB, the FSB, and other security service organizations. Individuals in this group, such as Sergei Ivanov and Alexei Kudrin, were among Putin's closest and primary connections when he was making the transfer from Saint Petersburg to Moscow and slowly moving up the ladder.<sup>9</sup>

Other key groups include the "economists" from Saint Petersburg, oligarchs who owned many of the most valuable companies in Russia, and by extension the media, as well as other figures already present in the Yeltsin administration (like Sergei Shoigu, now the Minister of Defense) who have displayed loyalty to Putin and his beliefs over the decades.<sup>10</sup>

What all these individuals and groups have in common is that they possess some basic levels of loyalty not just to Putin himself but also to his agenda and worldview. As Taylor describes in *The Code of Putinism*, ideas of the code include anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism combined with statism and conservatism. Habits include loyalty, order, control, and hypermasculinity. Its set of emotions includes respect/disrespect and vulnerability/fear.<sup>11</sup> These groups of people, and these components of the code, make for Putin and his people.

## Section II: (How) Long May He Reign?

Given President Putin's increasingly strong opposition to the United States and his invasion of the rest of Ukraine in February 2022, the chances of resuming cordial relations with the Russian Federation while Putin remains president are low. On the other hand, if Putin successfully evades being arrested and tried in the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes committed in Ukraine or avoids any other immediate risk to his rule, it is quite possible that President Putin may be able to live up to his song-inspired persona in

that he "will not run away."<sup>12 13</sup>

A quick look at the websites of the State Department and the White House provides the clear conclusion that there is one important driver of Washington's approach to Russia: defending Ukraine.<sup>14 15</sup> Beyond that, there is no detailed long-term plan. The *U.S. National Security Strategy* from October 2022 highlights that "Putin will not change" and thus the main policy of the United States towards Russia is constraining it, defending Ukraine, and holding Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> There is a quick mention about the United States developing "pragmatic modes of interaction" on certain issues.<sup>17</sup>

Otherwise the United States is officially waiting for the day in which the people of Russia can choose their own government - in other words, waiting for Putin to depart. One significant problem with that plan is that it does not provide a definite time span. Another significant problem is that President Putin may not be leaving office anytime soon.

## The Current Kremlin Forecast: Foggy and Dark

Several scholars have written articles and reports about how President Putin is likely to leave office. Two such authors are Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, who published a research article in April 2022 which, using findings from other regime leaders like Putin, provides statistics about how President Putin is likely to end his time in office. As they mention towards the end of their article, "how Putin exits office is likely to shape the trajectory of post-Putin Russia."<sup>18</sup> Their findings on the probability of departure are as follows:

- 31-50%, death in office, especially if the leader is over 65 years of age;<sup>19</sup>
- 20-24%, removal due to protest;<sup>20</sup>
- 10-13%, coup or civil war.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to providing data on Putin's possible routes of departure, Kendall-Taylor and Frantz include notes on the possible fallout of Putin's departure from office. In their first mention, the chances of an immediate transition to a democracy

after the departure of a personalist dictator aged 65 years or older is about 8%.<sup>22</sup> While the authors point out that this is not a promise Russia will never transition to a democracy post-Putin, their results show that long-term autocratic regimes do not provide good environments for democracy to quickly develop. If Putin dies in office, then one of the elites in his inner circle will succeed him and likely carry on the ideology and practice of Putin. There is some chance of light reform and moderation on the part of the new leader, but most of the key policies in place will probably remain in place.

The only way in which there would be a sudden change in direction of national and foreign policy for Russia is in the event of Putin's removal or forced departure by mass public protest.<sup>23</sup> In her May 16 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kendall-Taylor said there is a chance of some "meaningful political change" in the event the Russian military suffers a massive defeat in Ukraine, making Putin's position more unstable.<sup>24</sup> A defeat in Ukraine could lead to pressure on Putin and a change in leadership is possible. However, reasons to be cautious of such a projection are that Russians in general may not have a positive view of the West or the United States after a prolonged period of sanctions and influence by propaganda.

Max Bergmann of the Center for Strategic and International Studies also published an article in January 2023 about this topic. Bergmann makes four predictions about how Putin could leave office:<sup>25</sup>

1. Putin's regime could collapse due to stresses and mismanagement;<sup>26</sup>
2. Insiders or members of the elite could initiate a coup;<sup>27</sup>
3. A new President could be chosen to remove the pressure on the regime as a result of Putin's actions;<sup>28</sup>
4. Mass protests could uproot Putin.<sup>29</sup>

Both articles entertain the possibility of, and in some cases covertly hope for, President Putin's removal as a result of a coup or mass protest. Additionally, the authors of both articles make recommendations about what the United States can do to prepare for the departure of President Putin, such as sanction more

Russian elites and members of Putin's inner circle, increase anti-corruption efforts, and aid civil society and Russians opposed to Putin's rule.<sup>30</sup>

## A Game of Time

While the authors of both articles highlight reasonable scenarios for Putin's departure, there are significant holes in their analyses and in their predictions.

Firstly, Bergmann's predictions, while plausible, seem to be based on favorable outcomes for the United States and its allies. Kendall-Taylor and Frantz have enough statistical evidence in their predictions to give them strong plausibility, but their predictions fall short of accommodating their prime finding: that Putin is more likely to stay in power for a long time than not. Secondly, both article authors gloss over the evidence that military coups are largely non-existent in and hard to achieve in Russia.<sup>31</sup> And thirdly, neither of these authors entertain the idea of predicting who could, and who is likely to not, come next after Putin.

There is little to no joy in contemplating policy scenarios in which most, if not everything, one hopes for does not come true. Yet for proper and sound policy planning, it is better to entertain the chance of such unfavorable odds and have events turn in one's favor rather than to not. This section in particular entertains the scenario of the least-favored outcome by most U.S. analysts: Putin remaining President of Russia until his death or uncoerced departure. If such a scenario ever does truly take place, at least there will be some contemplation on how to proceed and plans to mitigate its effects before it happens.


All things considered equal, let us assume that Kendall-Taylor and Frantz are correct in their data findings and that Putin is 50% likely to die in office, meaning he could die anytime between now and 2036, maybe past then. In the event of Putin dying naturally in office, according to the Russian constitution as it currently stands (unless Putin changes the succession of office), the Prime Minister will assume the office of the President of Russia.<sup>32</sup> Following this equation, if Putin dies in office or suddenly departs at some point in the near future, then Mikhail Mishustin is going to succeed Putin as President of the Russian Federation.

However, blindly accepting this prediction is



problematic because time is a variable in determining who could succeed Putin. As the following table illustrates, Putin has yet to have a Prime Minister hold the office for more than nine years.

**Figure 1: Holders of the Office of President of the Russian Federation, Prime Minister, and First Deputy Prime Minister from 1999 to the Present**

	President of the Russian Federation	Prime Minister	First Deputy Prime Minister
1999	Boris Yelstin 	Sergei Stepashin  > Vladimir Putin  	Vladimir Putin   > Mikhail Kasyanov 
2000	Boris Yelstin  > Vladimir Putin   	Vladimir Putin   > Mikhail Kasyanov 	Mikhail Kasyanov 
2001	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Kasyanov 	-
2002	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Kasyanov 	-
2003	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Kasyanov 	-
2004	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Kasyanov  > Mikhail Fradkov   	-
2005	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Fradkov   	Dmitry Medvedev  
2006	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Fradkov   	Dmitry Medvedev  
2007	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Fradkov    > Viktor Khristenko > Viktor Zubkov   	Dmitry Medvedev   + Sergei Ivanov   
2008	Vladimir Putin   > Dmitry Medvedev  	Viktor Zubkov   > Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev   + Sergei Ivanov   > Viktor Zubkov  
2009	Dmitry Medvedev   	Vladimir Putin   	Viktor Zubkov   
2010	Dmitry Medvedev   	Vladimir Putin   	Viktor Zubkov   
2011	Dmitry Medvedev   	Vladimir Putin   	Viktor Zubkov   
2012	Dmitry Medvedev   > Vladimir Putin   	Vladimir Putin   > Dmitry Medvedev  	Viktor Zubkov   > Igor Shuvalov 
2013	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov 
2014	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov 
2015	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov 
2016	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov 
2017	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov 
2018	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Igor Shuvalov  > Anton Siluanov 
2019	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev  	Anton Siluanov 
2020	Vladimir Putin   	Dmitry Medvedev   > Mikhail V. Mishustin 	Anton Siluanov  > Andrey Belousov
2021	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Mushushtin 	Andrey Belousov
2022	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Mushushtin 	Andrey Belousov
2023	Vladimir Putin   	Mikhail Mushushtin 	Andrey Belousov
	<b>LEGEND:</b>		
	 VLADIMIR PUTIN		
	 = Confirmed Former CPSU Member		
	 = Confirmed Military Service Member	(At any point in time)	
	 = Espionage/Security Services Member	(At any point in time)	
	 = Saint Petersburg Administration Alumni	(At any point in time)	

Sources:<sup>33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43</sup>

It is possible that Putin might break from this pattern and Mikhail Mishustin could stay in the office of Prime Minister until Putin's departure, which would mean him staying in up to 2036, or later.

There are two reasons to suspect this: 1) Mikhail Mishustin was born in 1966, making him 57 years old at the present moment. If he stays in office as late as 2036, or earlier, and then succeeds Putin as President

of Russia, Putin will be 83 years old and Mishustin will be nearly 70 years old.<sup>44</sup> And 2) while the pattern of tenure for Putin's Prime Ministers is no guarantee that he will replace Mishustin after 9 years, there is no evidence to suggest why Putin would keep him for an extensive period of time.

Mikhail Mishustin's appointment is itself an interesting case in the study of Putin and his government. For a long time, the members of Putin's inner circle that had higher levels of access to the policymaking sector were individuals either from the siloviki or were acquainted with Putin somehow through the city and government offices of Saint Petersburg. Mishustin is neither a member of the siloviki, nor is there any record of him being educated in or having any links to the city or government of Saint Petersburg.

Furthermore, when he was relieving his long-time colleague and fellow Saint Petersburg alumnus Dmitry Medvedev of his position as Prime Minister, Putin was provided the profiles of multiple candidates to replace him. Surprisingly, Mikhail Mishustin was not one of the original proposed candidates but instead was picked by Putin personally.<sup>45</sup> According to reports, Putin met Mishustin many years earlier and was impressed by his technical skills.<sup>46</sup> This could be a sign of a decline in influence among some of Putin's old allies, although there is no evidence of decline in influence of the siloviki, and high-level placement now rests more on loyalty to him and his beliefs, in addition to what he thinks will best fit in instituting his agenda.

Some have entertained the idea of some of Putin's closest cabinet members like current Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov or the Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu taking over the roles of President of Russia. The figure below illustrates how long both men have served alongside Putin in various roles over the years.

possibilities of Putin’s departure and the nature of his potential successor.

## The Race Against Time and Life’s Hidden Factors

### Time Frame I: Putin Leaves Office in One to Five Years (up to 2028)

In this first time frame, Putin could cease to be President of the Russian Federation within the next one to five years, in which there is a possibility he and his party could maintain control over the government following the expected 2024 election cycle where he and members of his political team are up for election or reelection. This time frame is the most vulnerable for Putin’s regime stability, as Taylor notes - if Putin leaves office within the next five years, then the next leader of Russia will definitely be someone the United States is familiar with.<sup>57</sup>

Putin is probably most vulnerable in this time frame because sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies, and the immediate effects of the war in Ukraine will have a more noticeable impact on Russian society and its state foundations.

Additionally, restrictions on personal freedoms in Russia in response to public reaction to the conflict have resulted in a mass emigration of Russians from Russia out of fear of being mobilized to join the military and fight in Ukraine. Others have left in opposition to Putin and his government. Public dissatisfaction with the conflict, which may result in more mass protests, combined with defection or opposition to Putin amongst the elites, would pose a serious challenge to his rule. However, if he manages to survive this time frame he is more likely to make it into the next one.

In the event that Putin dies in office or is forced to step down, the next President of Russia will be Prime Minister Mishustin, or someone already high in status within his circle.

### Time Frame II: Putin Leaves Office in Six to Ten Years (up to 2033)

In this time frame, Putin could retain his position for more time as a result of the war in Ukraine turning

**Figure 2. Ministers of Defense, Emergency Situations, and Foreign Affairs, in Which the Position Holders Were Sergei Shoigu or Sergey Lavrov, From 1999 to the Present**

	Minister of Defense	Minister of Emergency Situations	Minister of Foreign Affairs
1999	Igor Sergeev	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov
2000	Igor Sergeev > Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov
2001	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov
2002	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov
2003	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov
2004	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Igor Ivanov > Sergey Lavrov
2005	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2006	Sergei Ivanov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2007	Sergei Ivanov > Anatoly Serdyukov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2008	Anatoly Serdyukov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2009	Anatoly Serdyukov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2010	Anatoly Serdyukov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2011	Anatoly Serdyukov	Sergei Shoigu	Sergey Lavrov
2012	Anatoly Serdyukov > Sergei Shoigu	Sergei Shoigu > Ruslan Tsalikov > Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2013	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2014	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2015	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2016	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2017	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov	Sergey Lavrov
2018	Sergei Shoigu	Vladimir Puchkov > Evgeny Zinichev	Sergey Lavrov
2019	Sergei Shoigu	Evgeny Zinichev	Sergey Lavrov
2020	Sergei Shoigu	Evgeny Zinichev	Sergey Lavrov
2021	Sergei Shoigu	Evgeny Zinichev > Alexander Chupriyan	Sergey Lavrov
2022	Sergei Shoigu	Alexander Chupriyan > Alexander Kurenkov	Sergey Lavrov
2023	Sergei Shoigu	Alexander Kurenkov	Sergey Lavrov

Sources:<sup>47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56</sup>

As his original circle of allies and friends starts to advance in age and may potentially degrade in terms of utility in meeting his goals, there is a growing possibility that President Putin may start selecting more younger underlings based less on background and past services and more so on technical expertise, skills, and personal loyalty above all else. With that in mind, there are three frames of time in which President Putin could potentially leave office. As Kendall-Taylor and Frantz mentioned earlier, the timing is just as important as how Putin leaves office. As such, these three time frames are classified in terms of time length and, within each one, the

into a prolonged, frozen conflict or by sustaining Russia's standing through a negotiated settlement, or even if Russia outright strategically loses the conflict. While the latter possibility may sound like a guaranteed indicator of Putin's demise, Kendall-Taylor and Frantz noted that even in the event of losing a conflict, personalist dictators like Putin who have been in power for a long time are more likely to survive the ramifications of losing a war.<sup>58</sup>

If Putin manages to keep the elites on his side and keep the masses under his control, he would only have to balance growing the economy or improving the daily lives of the average Russian versus enriching and providing luxurious servicing for his elite friends and insiders.

Mishustin could possibly retain his position as the Prime Minister of Russia, along with several other current members of Putin's cabinet staying where they are. However, as time goes on, and if the war in Ukraine continues to wage on as a frozen conflict, infighting among Putin's elites and ministers coupled with mismanagement and strategic failures might bring in new faces to fill those roles. Members of his inner circle will get older, as will he. And like most long-term dictators, it is likely that his circle of trust will shrink rather than expand.

### **Time Frame III: Putin Leaves Office in 11-15 Years or More (Up to 2036 or Beyond)**

In this time frame, Putin will likely have endured a protracted conflict in Ukraine coupled with the ramifications of a myriad of western sanctions and the effects on Russia's economy and political institutions. At this point in time, Putin will be approaching his 80s, as will several other members of his cabinet and inner circle. It is probable that a few senior members of Putin's inner circle will have departed and been replaced, or even died of old age or other causes. This time frame is not only the most unknown stage for predicting Putin's departure, but it is also to be both the most enduring end of his reign and the stage at which new, relatively unknown individuals will start to fill the power positions in Russia.

By 2036, if indeed he is still the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin will be in his 80s as will Lavrov and Shoigu; Medvedev will be in his 70s although he

is not likely to return to a senior position of power having already served as President and with his popularity declining. Furthermore, Mishustin will be approaching his early 70s.<sup>59</sup> And while it is possible that Mishustin might continue to stay on as Prime Minister and eventually succeed Putin as the President of Russia, firstly, he will have broken Putin's previous pattern on not having a Prime Minister last ten years. Secondly, Putin will have needs to be fulfilled on the part of his Prime Minister and Mishustin may not be able to meet those needs at such a time.

At this time frame, Putin is likely to have brought in fresh faces into his government. It will have been 44 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and people born even a few years prior will have no memories of life under the communist period of Russian history. People in Putin's government born in 1980 onwards will not have been members of the Communist Party, any intelligence agency service will have been with the post-Soviet and post-KGB agencies, and new members with education or work experience in Saint Petersburg will likely not have met Putin in their time there because by that point he was already in Yeltsin's government. So in this time frame, other factors will play a role in deciding who makes it into Putin's inner circle.

Given this information, one can make the following conclusions: 1) Putin is more likely to die in office than not, even though there are some slight chances of an early departure. 2) Putin's leaving will not automatically lead to a transition to democracy. And 3) the longer Putin stays in power, the more stable he will be, but also the chances of him being replaced by someone less known now will increase and new people will slowly fill the positions of the current elite.

## **Section III: Enduring The Freeze, Awaiting the Melt**

### **The Coming Russian Studies Gap**

The higher likelihood of Putin dying in office, or staying in office however long for an extensive period of time, will demand more research and up-to-date information on the elites and government officials that rise through the ranks in the Russian government.

One potential challenge to the United States' national security and foreign policy agencies is that the longer Putin remains in office, it will mean a renewed reliance on Russian studies specialists and scholars at a time when Russian studies in America is not in the most stable position. While this is not as discussed as much in most policy recommendations on Russia, it is nevertheless crucial.

According to a 56-page report published in July 2015 by the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), despite the strong levels of study in the United States in the field of Russian studies overall, there are several noted areas of concern, such as low-levels of enrollment in graduate-level Russian programs and an even lower rate of new faculty positions in the Russian language and area studies.<sup>60</sup>

Many news articles and op-eds echoed these concerns mentioned in the report, especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the fighting in eastern Ukraine. Articles from the New York Times and the Washington Post featured many government and academic figures expressing their worry about the declining number of Russian experts in the United States, particularly those in government service.<sup>61 62</sup>

At the time of these reports and articles, it was still possible for students and scholars in the United States to travel to Russia to learn the language and conduct research and education to learn more about Russia's politics and internal systems. Now in 2023, study in Russia is impossible, and studying in Ukraine is unpredictable and not entirely safe with the war still ongoing. As the war continues, and for as long as Putin remains in power, study in Russia, and Ukraine, will be implausible and contact with Russians, especially government workers, will be next to impossible. If Putin can rule Russia between now and for as long as 2036 - if not longer - then the United States is bound to risk a critical shortage of Russian scholars and specialists. Since the majority of current Russian specialists and scholars are closer to retirement age than not, the 13 years in which Putin could remain President of Russia present a time of gradual decline of Russian studies knowledge in the United States.

The time between now and Putin's departure could ensure that unless study and research opportunities resume between the United States and Russia, there will be fewer opportunities to learn the Russian language in country-centered immersive programs. It will mean that American students and scholars are limited in conducting research at the source of information needed to complete their education on Russian studies. And perhaps most importantly, it means little to no contact with the younger generation of bureaucrats and government employees that could one day play critical roles in the post-Putin government and shape the first series of relations between the United States and Russia after Putin.

In order to prepare for a post-Putin Russia, the United States cannot afford to lose any more scholars and experts on Russian politics and Russia's ruling elite. While some programs have continued and important funding sources continue to be available, the level of funding and programs available are not as strong or numerous as they once were during the Cold War. Due to the relatively isolated nature of the Russian Federation today, the few remaining countries with Russian language speakers and access to knowledge and information about Russia's internal politics are more important than ever for young scholars and researchers wanting to gain more insight and knowledge to one day become the next generation of Russian experts.

## **Policy Recommendations**

To best prepare for the post-Putin Russia, the United States ought to take the following measures:

### **1. Provide More Assistance for Graduate and Doctoral Russian Studies Programs**

Many positions in academia and government require advanced educational degrees, particularly in Russian language and Russian studies. This is problematic as graduate education and doctoral programs in the United States, especially faculty positions, are struggling due to lower enrollments, which create cuts to programs. This in turn leads to lower levels of enrollment, completing a vicious cycle of academic



decline.

To mitigate this gap the United States Congress, in coordination with the Departments of State, Defense, and Education, should invest more funding to be made available to scholars and students in need of financial aid to participate in the programs and also assist schools and institutions with grants to ensure the long-term life of these programs.

## **2. Provide More Spaces For Study Abroad Programs to Safe Countries for Language Immersion and Area Studies**

As studying in Russia and Ukraine are not safe nor stable places for study abroad and in-country research projects, the Russian-speaking countries of the former Soviet Union offer a viable substitute for language immersion and in-country area studies. Countries like Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan are safer for Americans to travel and study in. They remain immersive routes to learn the Russian language and also serve as alternative destinations to conduct research on Russian studies. In the event that the war in Ukraine ends before Putin leaves office, it would be crucial for American students and scholars to resume their studies in Ukraine.

## **3. Be Prepared to Engage with a Post-Putin Government, Regardless of Whether a Democracy or Not - and Continue Limited Cooperation on Relevant Policy Areas**

Russia is too large a country and too consequential a geopolitical force with which to cut off contact until a change in leadership. With the New START Treaty - the last bilateral nuclear weapons treaty between the United States and Russia - already in danger of falling apart and many other rising issues, the United States and Russia will need to engage in some levels of bilateral cooperation even in the midst of the war in Ukraine.

Furthermore, as the chances of a post-Putin government quickly transitioning to a democracy are not statistically high, there is no rational basis for only

cooperating with a democratic Russian government. The United States will have to be ready to try and resume cooperation with a post-Putin government even if it retains some of its previous features and behaviors. The United States is not in any position to influence the governmental form of Russia without risking severe blowback.

Given the various outcomes that could constitute a post-Putin Russia, the United States needs to be prepared for all eventual scenarios, be it a transition to a democratic government or a continuation of Putin's regime, and to avoid being caught unprepared as much as possible.

## **Conclusion**

Since taking office, President Vladimir Putin has had a profound impact not only on Russia's internal system of governance but also Russia's national and foreign policy. He serves as both the chief executive of the Russian government and as the boss of an extensive clan, or "team," of people in the public and private sectors united by both personal loyalty to Putin and sharing some of his key beliefs. Even in the midst of the war in Ukraine and the turmoil caused by international sanctions, there is still a chance that Putin may be able to weather the current environment and remain in power for many more years to come.

However, the longer Putin stays in power there is a growing possibility that the successor to the President of Russia may not be someone currently known or currently in the line of succession. According to research conducted by other scholars, the longer Putin stays in power the more stable he becomes. At the same time, the longer he stays in power the greater the chance that newcomers will emerge to play critical roles in the transfer of a Putinist Russia to a post-Putin Russia. If Putin manages to stay in power for as long as 2036, then there will be more turnover of his inner circle as age and declining marginal utility will take their toll on who stays and who departs. This will require careful monitoring of the members of Putin's elite and exclusive circle of allies and underlings so as to predict the most likely outcome, in domestic and foreign policy, of Russia's stance after Putin leaves office, for whatever reason.

Unfortunately, this comes at a time when the status of Russian studies in the United States is not in a stable or sustainable position to meet the task at hand. Russian studies will need additional funding and program support from the federal government to sustain and grow the study of the Russian language and the various aspects of Russian studies in the United States in order to examine Russia's internal politics and changes in its governance under Putin. Doing so will enable the United States to not be caught off guard and unprepared when it will have to one day reckon with a post-Putin Russia.

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