

# Towards Putin's Last Presidency?

by Carolina De Stefano

## ABSTRACT

The March 2018 elections in Russia are all but certain to deliver a fourth term to President Putin. However, the anti-corruption protests of 2017 signalled that, in the long term, the Kremlin might have to cope with a lack of steady economic growth and modernization. Questions linger as to whether some of the recent political and institutional trends – namely the growing influence of the military on the Kremlin's decisions and the “technocraticization” of the governing elite – will be confirmed during Putin's next stint as Russian president. As this will probably, though not certainly, be Putin's last term, succession struggles in Moscow and attempts by the president to secure a safe departure from office are likely to impact on Russian politics in the years to come.

*Russia | Elections | Domestic policy*

**keywords**

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### 1. The 2017 March protests and the need for an overwhelming victory in the 2018 elections

One year before the 2018 presidential elections and an all but certain victory by the incumbent, President Vladimir Putin, Russia experienced the first mass protests after the 2011–12 “winter of discontent”. In March 2017, thousands of people took to the streets after Aleksei Navalny, the most visible opposition leader, posted a video denouncing Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev’s billionaire properties and urged people to demonstrate against high-level corruption.<sup>1</sup> On 12 June, Russia’s national holiday, a new wave of protests was organized with the same goals in view. In both cases, Navalny was jailed just before attending the meetings.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there are important differences between the major anti-government demonstrations of 2011–12 and the 2017 demonstrations. The former were concentrated in Moscow and St Petersburg, primarily headed by the metropolitan middle class, and directed against electoral fraud and Putin’s announcement that he would seek a third presidential mandate, after his two previous terms between 2000 and 2008 and his “interlude” as prime minister in 2008–12.

In 2017, participants were younger, poorer, and spread across more than a hundred different cities and regions.<sup>3</sup> Protesters did not complain about the lack of political pluralism, as they did five years earlier, nor did they take to the streets to express their support for Navalny. Rather, they demanded better jobs and expressed

<sup>1</sup> The video of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation *On vam ne Dimon* (He is not dimon to you) is available at [https://youtu.be/qrwlk7\\_GF9g](https://youtu.be/qrwlk7_GF9g).

<sup>2</sup> “Kremlin Critic Alexei Navalny Jailed for the Third Time This Year”, in *The Guardian*, 2 October 2017, <https://gu.com/p/7apg6>.

<sup>3</sup> Among others, see Pavel Antekar and Nikolay Epple, “Rekonstruktsya Protesta” (Rebuild of a protest), in *Vedomosti*, 12 June 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/06/13/694038-rekonstruktsiya-protesta>.

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frustrations about how Russia works, about how corruption and nepotism hamper the country's development and mortify meritocracy. The protesters came from the most politically disaffected segments of the population. They do not mind who the president is (not least because many of them have only lived in Putin's Russia); they are unlikely to go to the polls or to believe that the election could bring about an improvement in their living standards.

The 2017 rallies did not threaten the stability of the regime. Nevertheless, they showed that corruption has become such a burden on the country's economic development that it has the potential to feed social discontent and so might, in the long term, undermine the legitimacy of Putin's twenty-year long rule. Besides, Navalny proved that he could reach out to young voters through social networks and lead a new form of protest that is diffuse geographically, politically "amorphous" – and therefore more difficult for the government to prevent.

The Kremlin's reactions tend to indicate that, in the run-up to the 2018 presidential elections, it is taking these protests seriously. Probably the most significant event of this otherwise highly predictable presidential race has been the final decision of the Electoral Commission to deny Navalny the right to run because of pending criminal charges against him.<sup>4</sup> After the March and June demonstrations, his exclusion was expected but not certain. Navalny's participation in the elections would change nothing in terms of the final result. While he has no chance of winning, his admission into the running might allow Putin to give the upcoming vote an image (especially abroad) of a seemingly competitive race.<sup>5</sup> The fact that Navalny is prevented from competing and that Putin is running alone cannot be fully grasped without considering that, this time, the Russian president is not seeking a simple win, but a landslide victory.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2016, Sergey Kiriyenko, the deputy chief of the presidential administration, reportedly summed up the Kremlin's goal with the formula "70-70": Putin would need 70 per cent turnout and 70 per cent of votes.<sup>7</sup> Ideally, the 70-70 should also be evenly spread across Russia. In practice, some ethnically non-Russian republics (such as Dagestan and Chechnya), which traditionally guarantee unanimous support for the Kremlin, are likely to raise the national average of votes

<sup>4</sup> "Russian Presidential Election: Alexei Navalny Barred from Competing", in *BBC News*, 25 December 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42479909>.

<sup>5</sup> Evgenia Kuznetsova, "Razvilka dlya Kremlya: Zachem Navol'nomu Otkazali v Registratsii na Vyborakh" (Why Navalny was denied registration as a candidate in the election), in *RBK*, 25 December 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/12/2017/5a4121309a794763145e9fc7>.

<sup>6</sup> His main formal opponents are Ksenia Sobchak, a well-known TV anchor and daughter of Putin's former mentor in Saint Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak; the old leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) Vladimir Zhirinovskiy; Pavel Grudinin, the Communist Party candidate; Grigory Yavlinsky from the Yabloko social-liberal party; and Boris Titov, who is running with the Party of Growth.

<sup>7</sup> Natalia Galimova, "V Kremle Obsudili Poluchenie 70% Golosov Za Svoego Kandidata na Vyborakh" (In Kremlin has been discussed to receive 70% of votes for their main candidate), in *RBK*, 26 December 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/12/2016/58600eff9a794781b168ae26>.

in Putin's favour. Be that as it may, to secure a strong fourth six-year mandate Putin believes he needs widespread support.<sup>8</sup> With a landslide victory in mind, Putin's electoral programme has had no room for painful reforms and put forward instead a set of relatively cheap measures, such as family subsidies.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Putin has sought to consolidate support by rejuvenating the leadership in the regions. In 2017 many regional governors were removed, deemed weak or unpopular local leaders. The timing was linked to the presidential elections and the goal was ostensibly to reduce the population's "unhappiness".<sup>10</sup> In recent months, this process has allowed the Kremlin to both bypass the popular vote and choose in advance figures whose task is to keep order and guarantee local support among the majority of the federal subjects (Russia's constituents entities, which range from republics to oblasts to cities and still others).<sup>11</sup>

The Kremlin's main concern is low turnout. Since voters have no real voting alternatives, turnout is indeed more fundamental than the share of votes: the number of ballots is directly proportional to the degree of support the president enjoys. This is the reason why Navalny, with other members of the opposition, has called on Russian citizens to boycott the forthcoming vote.<sup>12</sup> In the attempt to boost turnout, the government has postponed the date of the election so that it will coincide with the celebration of the annexation of Crimea. The move does not seem bound to produce the hoped-for result, at least looking at current estimates. According to a recent poll by the independent Levada Center, turnout is expected to be around 58 per cent – well below the goal of 70 per cent.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Putin's fourth term: In search of new sources of legitimacy?

Mass protests and the risk of a relatively low turnout point to a structural challenge that the Russian government will have to cope with in the future. In contrast to

<sup>8</sup> Tobin Harshaw, "What Is Vladimir Putin Up To? Here's an Educated Guess", in *Bloomberg View*, 18 February 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-18/putin-s-latest-game-winning-in-syria>.

<sup>9</sup> Katarzyna Chawrylo, "Putin's Pro-family Support Programme", in *OSW Analysis*, 6 December 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-12-06/putins-pro-family-support-programme>.

<sup>10</sup> Natalya Zubarevich, "The Fall of Russia's Regional Governors", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 12 October 2017, <http://ceip.org/2yj0U34>. On this, see also Dmitri Kamyshev, "Kak Vladimir Putin k svoemu chertvortomu sroku" (How Vladimir Putin is preparing for a fourth term), in *Vedomosti*, 27 December 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/12/28/746784-putin-gotovilsya>.

<sup>11</sup> Carolina De Stefano, "Three Years On, Russia Faces New Challenges in Crimea", in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 208 (10 October 2017), p. 2-4, [http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD\\_208.pdf](http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD_208.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> "Navalny's Bid for Presidency Shut Down by Russia's Election Commission", in *The Moscow Times*, 25 December 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/navalnis-bid-for-presidency-shut-down-by-russias-election-commission-60044>.

<sup>13</sup> Levada Center, *Sotsiologi Prognoziryuyut Rekordno Niskuyu Yavku na Prezidentskikh Vyborakh* (Sociologists predict a record low turnout in the presidential election), 13 December 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=17281>.

past scenarios, the Kremlin is now short of new sources of legitimacy to boost and strengthen popular support as it continues to avoid tackling Russia's structural dysfunctions. As Dmitri Trenin, a leading Russian expert and director of Carnegie Moscow Center, has pointed out, Russia's ambitious foreign policy is proving extremely costly and presents "a sharp contrast to its limited economic and financial capabilities".<sup>14</sup>

During his first two terms as president in 2000–08, Putin could count on steady economic growth boosted by stellar oil prices. In addition, he credibly presented himself as a reliable leader capable of re-establishing order and stability, as well internal security, after the tragic economic crisis of 1998 and the humiliating defeat in Chechnya in the conflict of 1994–96. Putin's initial decade in power produced higher living standards, giving birth to a middle class that had never existed before either in Russia or the Soviet Union. A growing trust in the future, along with improved relations and more intense exchanges with Europe especially, fuelled expectations among Russians (as well as in the West) that Dmitry Medvedev – Putin's liberal-leaning successor as president in 2008–12 – would usher in a period of increased openness and modernization. In fact, Medvedev's presidency turned out to be little more than an interregnum between Putin's presidential mandates. If anything, the interregnum made clear that, at least for a while, radical reforms were not on the agenda.<sup>15</sup>

The protests of winter 2011–12, which broke out after Putin (who had in effect governed the country as prime minister under Medvedev) announced his intention to run for president again, were driven by a strong feeling of disillusionment. The Kremlin saw the rallies primarily as an attempt by the United States to support regime change in Russia, along the tested pattern of the so-called "coloured revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine of 2003–04.<sup>16</sup> In response, the government tightened its control over society. The main effects were a series of laws that have increasingly limited the activities and freedom of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media, beginning with the law on foreign agents of 2012.<sup>17</sup> With the economy still reeling from the effect of the 2008–09 crisis and falling energy prices, Putin's primary sources for legitimizing his rule had to change. He turned to an assertive foreign policy, especially in the former Soviet space, and a discourse presenting him as a stalwart defender of Russia's national identity and traditional

<sup>14</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Highs and Lows: Russia's Foreign Policy at the Start of 2018", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 2 February 2018, <http://ceip.org/2EyjO7z>.

<sup>15</sup> Evgeny Gontmakher, "Fundament Peremen" (The foundation of change), in *Gazeta.ru*, 2 May 2012, [https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2012/05/02\\_a\\_4569433.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2012/05/02_a_4569433.shtml).

<sup>16</sup> A detailed analysis is provided in Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny, "Russia and the Colour Revolutions", in Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny (eds.), *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 15–36.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Lipman, "Russia's Nongovernmental Media under Assault", in *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2014), p. 179–190, [https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/GWASHU\\_DEMO\\_22\\_2/FNN2114284170261/FNN2114284170261.pdf](https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/demokratizatsiya%20archive/GWASHU_DEMO_22_2/FNN2114284170261/FNN2114284170261.pdf).

values against the "corrupt" liberal internationalism of the West.<sup>18</sup>

Attesting to the effectiveness of this new course, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 saw Putin's popular support peak, with his approval rating rising from 61 per cent in 2013 to 85 the following year.<sup>19</sup> The new role of Russia in the Middle East, especially its military involvement in the Syrian conflict since September 2015, also helped to relay an image of decisive and bold leadership internally and to showcase the return of Russia as a major power on the international stage. An official discourse linking Russia's regained status as a global power to the nation's cultural exceptionalism, imperial past and Christian Orthodox tradition contributed further to Putin's domestic prestige.<sup>20</sup>

However, in the long term, neither foreign policy endeavours nor conservatism are enough to compensate for the harshening of central control over the population or to offer an alternative solution to the need for structural economic reforms. While approval for Crimea's annexation is still high, *enthusiasm* for it – understood as the feeling underlying unconditional support for the government – is waning. Fifty-five per cent of Russians, for example, find it unfair that the peninsula's reconstruction is entirely financed by the federal budget.<sup>21</sup> Even more worrying for the regime, ordinary Russians are far less interested in the conflicts in the Donbas and Syria than they are in the Crimea issue. The regime has managed to shelter itself from discontent about its foreign adventures by finding ways to reduce casualties in the Russian armed forces (or covering them up). In Syria, the Kremlin heavily, though unofficially, relies on private companies, which has helped the government to present the intervention as a success without emphasizing the feeling of unease that Russia has been fighting a war.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, the point is not whether public opinion approves of Russia's actions in the Donbas and Syria – in abstract terms, it certainly does. The real question is what people would personally be ready to renounce to for the sake of Ukraine or Syria. The truth of the matter is that neither initiative seems to provide enough incentives, either economic or ideological, for people to mobilize.

<sup>18</sup> On Russia's conservative turn, see Andrey Makarychev and Aleksandra Yatsyk, "Refracting Europe: Biopolitical Conservatism and Art Protest in Putin's Russia", in David Cadier and Margot Light (eds.), *Russia's Foreign Policy. Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 138-155.

<sup>19</sup> Levada Center, *Odobrenie Vlastnykh Institutov* (Confidence in Government institutions), 7 December 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/2017/12/07/odobrenie-vlastnykh-institutov>.

<sup>20</sup> Ilya Kalinin, "Culture Matters: Why the Kremlin Wants to Be the Keeper of Russia's Cultural Heritage", in *The Calvert Journal*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/opinion/show/3608>.

<sup>21</sup> Carolina De Stefano, "Three Years On, Russia Faces New Challenges in Crimea", cit.

<sup>22</sup> Owen Matthews, "Putin's Secret Armies Waged War in Syria—Where Will They Fight Next?", in *Newsweek*, 17 January 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/2018/01/26/putin-secret-army-waged-war-syria-782762.html>.

Besides, the conservative values and nationalistic tone that the Kremlin has been espousing since the protests of 2011–12 not only fail to provide a comprehensive ideology but they risk undermining Putin's image as "president of the people" – of all the people, including ethnic and religious minorities – and giving too much room in public debate to extremist views.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, de-ideologization and a deliberate identity ambiguity have been the main threads keeping together a vast and divided country since 1991. As George Washington University Professor Marlene Laruelle puts it, the Russian regime is specifically designed to deny any division in the public sphere, as Russia is, after all, a 140-plus million-strong country with huge differences in terms of ethnicity, language and religion.<sup>24</sup>

In the very short term, the Kremlin will rely on the widespread popularity of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, which will be held in Russia this summer. The effect, though, will hardly last six years. What will Putin do when the post-World Cup frenzy fades?

### 3. A "Brezhnevist" solution? A technocratic shift and the ageing of Putin's regime

While Putin's Russia is generally perceived as fundamentally static, the president's leadership style and the way the country has been governed have been changing. Tatyana Stanovaya of the Center of Political Technologies in Moscow has noted that recently Putin seems to have abandoned his previous populist tone in favour of a more technocratic one, with government policies "reduced to the technical elements of business management".<sup>25</sup> This was particularly evident during last June's *Direct Line*, the annual TV marathon where the president replies to people's selected questions.

Whereas the decision-making process is more and more opaque and concentrated in Putin's inner circle, the technocratic tone reflects an important shift in the actual governing of the country, most notably in Russia's regions. During Putin's third presidency, in particular, the chaotic political panorama of the 1990s has been gradually replaced by the overall depoliticization of the lower structures of powers, as well as by a decrease in influence of regional businessmen who are not directly linked to the Kremlin.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Baunov, "Is Putin Losing Control of Russia's Conservative Nationalists?", in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 10 October 2017, <http://ceip.org/2y91AX5>.

<sup>24</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "Conservatism as the Kremlin's New Toolkit: An Ideology at the Lowest Cost", in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 138 (8 November 2013), p. 3, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-138.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Tatyana Stanovaya, "Putin's Post-Political Government", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 26 June 2017, <http://ceip.org/2tbrERu>.

In this context, particularly during Putin's third presidency, the general trend in the allocation of key government posts has been a strong preference for technocrats rather than politicians. Moreover, the role of political institutions and parties is clearly secondary compared with the state administrative machinery, and especially the presidential administration. In this context, the role of United Russia has been waning, with Putin increasingly distancing himself from his own party. Russia's federate regions are increasingly run by (often young) bureaucrats with no direct links with the local political elites. This is the case, for example, of the head of Kaliningrad, Anton Alikhanov (thirty-one years old and born in Abkhazia, with no previous ministerial experience), and of the newly elected governor of Udmurtia, Alexandr Brechalov (forty-five years old and originally from the southern Republic of Adygea).<sup>26</sup>

The technocratic shift in centre–periphery relations has two main explanations. First, it aims to prevent the formation of strong political-economic “regional machines”,<sup>27</sup> which the centre could lose control of (as during the era of former Russian president Boris Yeltsin). Second, bureaucrats are preferable to ambitious politicians for both their loyalty and their expected ability to work efficiently, particularly in periods of economic stagnation state budgets are shrinking, as is the case today.

In some respects the challenges Russia is confronted with today resemble those the Soviet Union faced during the final stages of Brezhnevism in the 1970s, when the leadership of the Communist Party ultimately found itself trapped in an inertial process of bureaucratization and structural ageing that could not sustain the weight of a superpower's status and ambitions.

#### 4. Russia 2018–24: What to expect

Some of the current trends will probably shape Putin's next presidential mandate. First, the search for permanent political stability could lead to a further tightening of the centre's grip on civil society. This will be even more the case if Putin fails to obtain the landslide he seeks at the forthcoming elections.

What we should expect is, first, a stronger control of the Internet. Until recently, the Internet was an unusually free and creative platform, above all if compared with the state's de facto monopoly of TV and the press. Last year's street protests, however, revealed that an entire (young) generation gets information not from

<sup>26</sup> Carolina De Stefano, “Kremlin-Governor Relations in the Run-Up to the 2018 Presidential Elections”, in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 201 (10 July 2017), p. 3, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD201.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> For the definition of Russia's regional machine, see Henry H. Hale, “Explaining Machine Politics in Russia's Regions: Economy, Ethnicity and Legacy”, in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2003), p. 228-263.

TV but from social media.<sup>28</sup> Unsurprisingly, the government has already adopted a series of new restrictions on the web and foreign media.<sup>29</sup> Second, the ongoing reconfiguration of the elite is likely to be strengthened. On the one hand, there has been a progressive shrinking of Putin's inner circle. On the other, the role of the military elite in the decision-making process, starting with the Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu, has increased.<sup>30</sup> Last but certainly not least, Putin's next term will invariably revolve also around the all-important question of the succession. The debate will unfold in two stages. The first question is whether Putin will modify the constitution in order to be allowed to run again in 2024.<sup>31</sup> As of today, experts disagree over the likelihood of this scenario.<sup>32</sup> If constitutional reforms are not made, a struggle within the elite will develop along two interdependent lines: a competition for Putin's succession and a careful preparation by Putin and his inner circle of a "safe" departure.<sup>33</sup> As of today, there is huge uncertainty over who might become Putin's successor. In August 2017, the Peterburgskaya Politika foundation released a list of the politicians who were most likely to become the next Russian president. At the top of the list there were Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Moscow's mayor, Sergey Sobyenin, and the current governor of Tula Oblast, Aleksey Dyumin.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

The March 2017 street protests in Russia did not represent a direct threat to Putin's regime. However, they signalled that the persistent problem of corruption in Russia – and its negative consequences on the functioning of state and economy – are a

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Borzenko, "Why Young People Were Russia's People of the Year 2017 in 2017", in *Meduza Stories*, 10 January 2018, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2018/01/10/why-young-people-were-russia-s-people-of-the-year-in-2017>.

<sup>29</sup> "Russian Lawmakers Adopt Final Drafts of Legislation Cracking Down on Internet Anonymity", in *Meduza News*, 21 July 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2017/07/21/russian-lawmakers-adopt-final-drafts-of-legislation-cracking-down-on-internet-anonymity>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Osborn and Jack Stubbs, "Backed by Putin, Russian Military Pushes into Foreign Policy", in *Reuters*, 13 December 2016, <https://reut.rs/2ylypi0>.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, currently the article 81(3) of the Constitution of the Russian Federation states that "One and the same person may not be elected President of the Russian Federation for more than two terms running". See *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, 12 December 2003, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-05.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> On the matter see, among others, Elena Mukhametshina, "Rossiiu Zhdut Izolyatsionizm, usilenie repressii i prodlenie 'epokhi Putina'" (In Russia one could expect isolationism, increased repression and the extension of the 'Putin era'), in *Vedomosti*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/01/18/748299-rossiyu-izolyatsionizm>.

<sup>33</sup> "Putin's Would-Be Successors Ranked Ahead of 2018 Elections", in *The Moscow Times*, 21 August 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/putins-would-be-successors-ranked-ahead-2018-elections-58706>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; Peterburgskaya Politika, *Reyting "Preymnikov"* (Successors' ranking), 21 August 2017, <https://fpp.spb.ru/fpp-top-successors>; Vera Kholmogorova and Vladimir Dergachev, "Eksperty Nazvali Vozmozhnykh Preemnikov Putina" (Experts named Putin's likely successors), in *RBK*, 21 August 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/08/2017/5999947f9a79470b77c71d3f>.

source of existing and potential discontent among segments of the population, which, in the long term, might undermine the centre's legitimacy. The Kremlin can count neither on the steady economic growth of the years 2000–08 nor on foreign policy initiatives and conservative discourse to ensure unconditional popular support or, alternatively, to compensate for increased control over civil society by the state.

Economic reforms aimed at developing the technology sector, in particular, will become all the more important for the Kremlin as Russia's ambitions in foreign policy grow. It is likely that major political and institutional trends already under way will accelerate during Putin's expected fourth presidential term in 2018–24. Such trends include a growing influence in the Kremlin by military elites and a top-down reshuffle of Russian political leaders, which privileges bureaucrats and young technocrats over professional politicians and businessmen. Looming large over all this is the question of Putin's succession. Provided the president does not change the constitution a second time to allow for a third successive presidential mandate, the bets are off. While 2024 may seem far in the future, the competition will start as soon as Putin makes his intentions clear.

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