

After Putin

Russia's Coming Succession Crisis

Julian G. Waller | August 7, 2026

A specter is haunting Russia—the specter of succession. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is 73 years old, has built a powerful personalist regime, but one that has no real plan for what comes next. Putin will eventually leave office, whether by death, illness, or—against all observable inclinations—stepping aside. But what happens then is unclear. It could be a rushed passing of the guard, a chaotic power struggle among elites long denied the highest political offices, or continued decay under the gerontocracy that currently runs the country alongside Russia's dictator.

Regime succession in Russia is therefore more than just a question of Putin himself. It is also about the eventual passing of an entire generation of elites who surround the Russian autocrat and still cling to most of the highest positions in the state. Many figures close enough to power to influence the choice of the next leader are as old as Putin is. Their own departure from the political scene is critical, because they still disproportionately control the institutions that determine who matters when succession eventually takes place.

Putin's tight-knit network has helped him consolidate power and maintain regime stability. Yet the system that has kept these reliable allies in office has also excluded subsequent generations from participating in high politics, gaining trust from other power holders, and learning leadership skills that they would need to effectively govern in the future. By preventing natural generational turnover, Putin's system has created such a blockage that much younger generations—including the relatives of current elites in Putin's inner circle—may leapfrog officials currently in their 50s and 60s who picture themselves as the autocrat's natural heirs. As Russia's highest elites age alongside Putin, there is no guarantee they will be able to manage a succession process or prevent the long-delayed ambitions of their younger colleagues from escalating into internal conflict.

Russia's succession process will flow through the country's formally democratic constitutional architecture, which requires a transitional election within three months of the president leaving office. But the constitution does not determine who can position themselves to win that election or who will eventually emerge as Russia's next leader. Instead, as was the case during the political transition in the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin, the decisions and dealmaking of a small cohort of insiders will determine who takes charge.

What is distinct now is that many of the analogous power brokers and contenders for leadership today are significantly older than the candidates to succeed Stalin were, which suggests that they may not have the energy or lucidity to manage a contested succession. If Putin's graying allies are still in place when he departs the presidency, they will have missed an opportunity to train a new elite generation and ensure a peaceful transition, just as Putin has missed an opportunity to groom his own successor.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESSION

Putin has consistently decided against designating a successor or institutionalizing a clear process for choosing one. United Russia, the country's nominal ruling party, was never built to designate an heir; rather, it was meant to ensure that elections produced reliably pro-regime seat-fillers in institutions such as parliament. Russia's constitution also excludes a position of

vice president, which avoids forcing the leader to dub a chosen inheritor.

According to the constitution, if the presidential office becomes vacant, the prime minister will become acting president until an election is held. But Putin has carefully chosen prime ministers who do not have a strong power base and cannot overshadow him. This also means that they are not obvious successors. The current prime minister, Mikhail Mishustin, for example, lacks his own network of loyal supporters, meaning that if he were to become acting president he would struggle to convert his position into a victory in a presidential election.

Putin's only experiment in potential succession, when he endorsed Dmitry Medvedev to be president, also ended with Putin asserting his unrivaled power. In 2008, having reached the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms as president, Putin supported Medvedev as presidential candidate while he would serve as prime minister. This could have been a trial run for a more permanent handoff of power. During Medvedev's term, however, Putin maintained significant power and then announced his return to the top role in 2011, ahead of the end of Medvedev's four-year term. Putin's move became known in Russia as "castling," in reference to the chess move in which the king and a rook move past each other, and since then the Kremlin has gradually sidelined Medvedev.

Putin is surrounded by aging allies.

Putin's effort to avoid clear succession plans at all costs is not foreordained. Many other personalist post-Soviet states have created institutional mechanisms for selecting new rulers or communicating clear expectations about who will take power after the current leader leaves. In Azerbaijan, for example, the former President Heydar Aliyev opted for a system of de facto hereditary succession: in 2003, his son, Ilham Aliyev succeeded him, and since then Ilham has installed his wife, Mehriban, in prominent roles (including as first vice president, which makes her the immediate successor to the presidency) and set up their three children as potential inheritors of the highest office by eliminating the age requirement for the presidency and giving them prominent public roles in politics, philanthropy, and culture. In Kazakhstan, in 2019, the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev engineered a controlled transition by passing on the presidency to the Senate speaker while maintaining his chairmanship of the country's Security Council.

But Putin has sent no such signals. He has opted instead to stay enthroned as long as possible, surrounded by aging allies who are also firmly entrenched in their offices. Putin's cohort of septuagenarian elites includes the heads of the security service (Alexander Bortnikov, age 74); the foreign intelligence agency (Sergei Naryshkin, age 71); the investigation bureau (Alexander Bastrykin, age 72); the national guard (Viktor Zolotov, age 72); the Security Council (Sergei Shoigu, age 71); and the military's general staff (Valery Gerasimov, age 70). Other aides and crony capitalists in his circles are of a similar age.

Putin has done this because he relies on these close personal connections to maintain control over the political system. He trusts his allies to deal with problems in ways familiar to him—including by using hard power to get rid of anyone who might challenge his authority. When the mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin rebelled against Putin, in 2023, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that then security council chief Nikolai Patrushev, age 75, orchestrated the plane crash that killed the rebel leader. Putin has also protected his direct allies while not extending any such shield to younger subordinates. Even when Putin purged Russia's defense ministry for corruption, including much of Shoigu's own personal network, Putin transferred Shoigu to a weighty role in the Security Council rather than disempower him.

THE STALIN SELECTORATE

This is not the first time Russia has stared down a succession crisis. In the 1950s, the Soviet Union struggled after Stalin died without having a clear leader to replace him. Although today's Russia is a far cry from the pervasive Soviet party-state of the Stalin era, there are important echoes of this earlier era for what lies ahead. As before, there is likely to be a central role for the regime's "selectorate"—that is, the small inner circle occupying central state offices who can compete for power and can influence the choice of the next leader.

The dynamics of how these elites emerge, coordinate, and fight remain critical to today's succession questions. And despite the existence of a formal constitutional path for immediate, temporary succession, such rules only provide rules for the transition; they do not decide who will take over. It is the individuals in the selectorate who matter.

When Stalin died, in 1953, Georgy Malenkov, the chairman of the Council of Ministers (similar to a contemporary prime minister), was the formally appointed successor. Malenkov, however, had a weak power base. His time as undisputed master of the Soviet Union was brief, and he quickly ended up forming a *de facto* triumvirate with the spy chief and interior minister Lavrenty Beria and foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov. Three other important figures—Nikita Khrushchev, the Communist Party secretary; Kliment Voroshilov, the chairman of the Presidium (the Soviet Union's equivalent to a head of state); and Georgy Zhukov, the deputy defense minister and a war hero—entered the ranks of the selectorate because their control over key institutions made them impossible to ignore. Internal fighting abounded. Within four months, the other members of the selectorate, worried that Beria was a threat, arrested him in a committee session and subsequently executed him.

Khrushchev gradually accumulated power through his control of the party's membership rolls, which allowed him to fill party councils with loyalists and eventually control the political agenda and outmaneuver his competitors in the Soviet Union's vast bureaucratic party apparatus. Yet because power consolidation took time, Khrushchev had to share power with Molotov, Malenkov, and others for years. It was not until 1957 that Khrushchev could use his control of subordinate committees and council bodies to fully capture power and take over leadership of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev's victory ensured the superiority of party leaders relative to other figures in the state, cementing his own power and giving him control of the regime.

What emerged after Stalin's death, therefore, was a years-long contest for power among figures who held senior positions. These figures held informal power from their networks within the Stalinist regime and proximity to Stalin himself, and they had formal power and authority because of their positions at the top of constitutionally privileged institutions. Although many individuals wanted to move up during the uncertain years of succession, only a subset of high-level political elites had the necessary informal ties and formal authority to be a part of the selectorate.

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

In the post-Stalin scramble for power, Russia's formal constitutional order served as the guidelines within which informal power politics played out. The same is likely to be the case with Putin's succession. And similar figures to those contesting power after Stalin's death will likely be the key players during the window between Putin's departure from the political scene

and the formal election to crown a new apex executive that follows. Those power players are the ones who have both institutional authority and strong personal networks, not merely one or the other.

The list of political figures who have both the power and authority to be part of the post-Putin selectorate is short. It includes the speakers of the lower and upper houses of parliament; the prime minister; the head of the Presidential Administration, equivalent to Putin's chief of staff; the secretaries of the State and Security Councils; the head of the security service, known as the FSB; the minister of defense; and, although less likely, others including the minister of finance and the head of the constitutional court.

Negotiations to find a successor to Putin will be determined by which individuals hold these critical institutional positions at the time that succession becomes a live question. It is difficult to predict who, exactly, will enter the fray and who will stay quiet until Putin leaves office, but it is personnel decisions made far earlier that will shape who is even possibly in contention. Because Putin's elderly allies still hold these offices today, they are already shaping the succession process by crowding out future contenders and may themselves still be in power when a transition occurs.

Even so, the comparatively young, who are motivated more by the prospect of becoming the next leader than by simply retaining their current privileges, will have the advantage. A current rumor among Russian journalists is that the 53-year-old State Council secretary and former Putin bodyguard Aleksei Dyumin could be a potential successor. The parliament Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, age 62, could be, too, as could Mishustin, age 60. So might the 64-year-old first deputy chief of staff, Sergei Kiriyenko, who serves as one of Putin's domestic policy advisers and is understood to have a large personal network.

But after that, the selectorate ages considerably.

Continued stagnation in the upper reaches of Putin's regime has warped natural patterns of advancement in its lower rungs. Without room to advance, a generation of potential leaders in their 50s and 60s have been shunted into deputy positions, sidelined to less powerful gubernatorial roles, or stuck in ministries far removed from centers of power. A similar pattern exists in Russia's military: the general staff officials running the war effort are old and protected from retirement, although many of the theater commanders on the ground are much younger. The delay in natural progression is so severe that the children of Russia's aging elites are being introduced below them in bureaucratic positions of their own, bypassing an intermediate generation. The son of the presidential aide Nikolai Patrushev, the son of the billionaire banker Yuri Kovalchuk, and a younger cousin of Putin, for instance, have all become ministers or deputy heads in their own right, rocketing into powerful positions without much prior preparation. This creates friction among members of Russia's political class and may increase internal discontent as established officials are bypassed in the promotion process. Every year that Putin maintains a narrow gerontocracy at the top of Russia's most powerful institutions, it increases the chances of intergenerational conflict.

THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS

How a state allows rising generational cohorts to move up the political ladder is critical for ensuring regime stability. A gradual churn among the highest offices provides the most ambitious rising elites a reason to invest in the regime, to make friends and allies with longtime insiders, and to gain trust within the circle of those who influence decision making. But if younger officials are constantly kept on the sidelines, the system can become unsustainable.

The old guard will become increasingly decrepit, which will lead to a rash of vacancies one way or another.

When these unplanned and relatively sudden transitions occur, they will elevate individuals who have never interacted with existing powerholders, have little shared trust, and have a fragile grip on the institutions they are supposed to control. Long-obstructed subordinates, lacking governing experience, will be thrust into these roles—or the sudden vacancy will spur a scramble among discontented insiders who will want to muscle each other out of the way. This is a recipe for potential chaos and could lead to dangerous missteps during the careful dance of coordinating a leadership transition.

In other words, the longer Russia's gerontocratic elites sit atop the institutions that have political legitimacy, constitutional centrality, and access to resources and loyalists, the less likely an orderly transition to the next president will be. Those who think they are in pole position to manage the post-Putin future will be pressed by others who have waited far too long in the wings yet have never really gained the skills to rule a country.

Even if Putin remains healthy, each potential office change among his inner circle will become the target of many individuals vying for a single coveted position in a potential selectorate. With a generation warped by disappointment and frustration, the pressure is mounting to exploit any opening. Instead of clarity and stability, the future of Russian politics will reflect the consequences of the seemingly deathless regime that Putin has built.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JULIAN G. WALLER is a Research Scientist in the Russia Studies Program at the Center for Naval Analyses and a Professorial Lecturer in Political Science at George Washington University.