



Putin's Next Job

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Overview

Putin's annual Q&A session with the public on 25 October highlighted that there is even more to the so-called '2008 Problem' than meets the eye. Perhaps the most important question now is not whether Putin will formally leave office (few now doubt that he will), or even the identity of his chosen successor (for all the human interest of that question); but rather exactly how Putin will arrange to keep hold of the reins of power after nominally handing them over to someone else.

Every remotely plausible new public job for Putin has been canvassed by Moscow's chattering classes, but the best of the arguments for now is on the side of proponents of a 'Deng Xiaoping' role of supreme leader without holding any formal office.

Context

President Putin continues to insist he will step down as President in 2008, but in his public phone-in on 25 October signalled a decisive continuing role. What will that role be?

Public Judgements

Putin will switch from President to a new job

- > **Andranik Migranyan**, Head of the Public Chamber Commission on National Strategy
- > **Vladimir Rudakov**, Profil magazine

Putin will emulate Deng Xiaoping

- > **Vyacheslav Nikonov**, Political Consultant
- > **Igor Bunin**, Director, Centre for Political Technologies
- > **Gleb Pavlovsky**, Effective Policy Foundation

Wrap

The Deng theory has the upper hand. This view would be further strengthened during the coming months if Dmitry Medvedev looked increasingly likely to be Putin's chosen successor.

Context

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What has become known in Russian political circles as "the 2008 problem" - that is, the power transition at the end of President Putin's second term in March of that year - is the single most important question on Russia's political agenda.

Putin continues to insist that he will step down as Russian President, as the Constitution demands. Already there is an active debate about who will take his place; although no-one seriously doubts that whoever Putin chooses as his successor will become the next President. But the more intriguing question is, even if Putin is no longer President, will things be arranged in such a way that real power will continue to rest in his hands?

The question was highlighted by Putin himself during his annual live televised Q&A session with the public on 25 October. He said that he expected to enjoy the people's trust and would retain "influence" - hence, by implication, an important role in public life.

The debate about whether Putin would actually try to be re-elected for a third term gathered momentum after the start of his second term in 2004. Even before this, in Putin's first term, the suggestion had been put forward that the Constitution be altered to make the presidential term of office seven years instead of four. Yet Putin has insisted all along that the Constitution applies as much to the President as to any other citizen, and has dismissed all suggestions to amend the Constitution to extend his time as President.

Putting all this together, the question now is less whether Putin will formally step down as President in 2008 (the assumption is that he will), but rather how it will be arranged for him to retain levers of power? Prime Minister; Speaker of the upper house, the Federation Council; Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Gazprom; even Chairman of the Constitutional Court have all been mooted as possible roles for him.

Public Judgements

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The debate was pulled into sharp focus by Putin's remarks in his public phone-in on 25 October, and centres on which role he will opt for after leaving the presidency in 2008 to ensure that he retains decisive influence.

Putin job switch

Putin can be expected to take on a formal role within the existing power structures in order to guarantee legitimacy to his future political activity.

- **Andranik Migranyan**, Head of the Public Chamber Commission on National Strategy, has been one of the most outspoken proponents of Putin retaining power from a different position (*Izvestiya*, 10 Oct 2006). He sees Putin as the "decisive figure" in Russian politics today, and says that there is no-one else capable of maintaining the stability and success of recent years. Migranyan suggests that Putin will become Chairman of the dominant United Russia party. If, as expected, United Russia were to win the parliamentary election in December 2007, Putin would control who became Prime Minister (since the Duma would have to approve the new president's nominee), and would retain the option of taking the job himself.
- Writing in the journal *Profil*, in August, journalist **Vladimir Rudakov** postulated an alternative, though equally effective role, when he suggested that Putin should become Speaker of the Federation Council. As he pointed out, this is currently the third post in seniority after the President and the Prime Minister. Rudakov considers that this could be changed, and that as Federation Council Speaker Putin could well have "a *de facto* role as 'Father of the Nation'".

Putin will emulate Deng Xiaoping

Putin as Deng

Putin has already established sufficient authority in Russia that he does not need an official position to maintain his guiding role in Russian politics; he could become a "Russian Deng Xiaoping".

- In the light of Putin's comment during the phone-in on 25 October, this option is looking increasingly credible. Speaking on the *Russia Today* TV news channel immediately after the phone-in, political consultant **Vyacheslav Nikonov**, who is close to the Kremlin, used the analogy with Deng Xiaoping to predict a supreme leader role for Putin without holding any formal office.
- For **Igor Bunin**, Director of the Centre for Political Technologies and quoted in *Gazeta*, Putin's remark in the phone-in was the strongest indication yet that Putin intends to retain control of the legislature after he steps down as President.
- For some, Putin's words merely confirmed what they already believed. One of Moscow's best known political analysts (who has close links to the Kremlin), **Gleb Pavlovsky**, founder of the Effective Policy Foundation, said back in September that it was Putin's duty to be a leader, and that he is uniquely placed to do this by becoming "a national leader who does not hold an office" (*Eurasianhome.org*, 14 Sept 2006).

Wrap

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Putin's 25 October phone-in dispelled any remaining doubts about his intention not to leave the political stage in 2008.

This suggests that whilst Putin wishes to avoid the risks to stability and loss of respectability which would flow from changing the Constitution to keep himself formally in office as President, he does consider that his position is strong enough to hold the reins of power while nominally handing them over to someone else.

The implication of Putin's words is that he believes that he does not need to dress up his continued influence with a new job title. And after four years as overseer of the country's political life, he would have the option of returning to the presidency in 2012. The Constitution does not rule out such a return after taking one term off. To this end, Putin could present his return to the Kremlin either to finish off the good work begun under him and continued by his successor; or, if things have gone wrong in 2008-12, to tidy up the mess his successor had made of his (Putin's) legacy.

Next Tests

The most revealing sign of Putin's intentions will be his choice of successor. Although no announcement is likely before autumn 2007, plentiful clues should be provided by the performance and official media coverage of Dmitry Medvedev and Sergei Ivanov, the two front-runners promoted by Putin himself in late 2005. Of these two, Medvedev appears to have the edge at this stage, if only because he should prove easier for Putin to control.