

March 2024 Russia Presidential Election: Russia and “Putin 3.0”

Putin and his Russia in 2024 will be different from the his first term in 2000 and the second term in 2012.

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Global Research, March 18, 2024

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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[This article was first published by GR in December 2023.]

Vladimir Putin, current President, announced that he would run again for the Presidential elections to be held in the Russian Federation on March 17, 2024. Although Putin’s candidacy is not a surprise in the regime that has been going on since the beginning of the twenty-first century and which some call ‘Putinism’, it is not intelligible to claim that he and his policies have not changed during this period. Although the form of government is continuous, Putin and his politics are also changing as a reflection of the developments both within Russia and in the international system.

In Russia, which is a security state due to its geography, the security bureaucracy/siloviki constitutes the main power element among the different interests and power centers within the non-monolithic power bloc. As a matter of fact, Putin and most of his core team come from here. However, Putin, who has maintained a balance between different powers since the beginning and virtually managed a coalition behind the image of a single man, does not refrain from updating his colleagues and policies according to changing conditions. In this regard, after the 2000 and 2012 elections, it seems reasonable to talk about three different Putins, the last version of which we will see in 2024.

When Putin first came to power in 2000, he took over a country that was floundering after the collapse of the Soviets and was almost dragged to the edge of the cliff under the Yeltsin administration.

After all, Russia in the 1990s was a country whose economy collapsed with neoliberal policies and shock therapies, its assets were plundered through privatizations, it was struggling with terrorism and political instability. The same period was the year when the

USA, once Russia's rival, enjoyed global hegemony in an international system that had become unipolar.

Under these conditions, in his first term, Putin began to follow a policy that was compatible with the Western system externally and prioritized security and economic recovery at home. He was successful and brought his country to its feet. Western influence was visible in his first cabinet and in examples such as his cooperation with the United States in the Afghanistan intervention. Moreover, he developed much stronger relations with Europe and attached special importance to Germany, where he worked for years as an intelligence officer during the Cold War. Unlike the USA, increasing gas sales to Europe and the investments received in return showed a search for integration.

When his two-term Presidential term, which was four years at the time, ended, he handed over the Presidency to Medvedev, who had close ties to Europe, although he remained effective as Prime Minister.

Because in the world of that period, Europe was a power that Moscow also took into consideration. However, the world economic crisis that broke out at the end of 2008 upset many balances, and the European countries were the ones most negatively affected by the global crisis. In addition, the 'Arab Spring' that emerged in the following years, and specifically the events in Libya and Syria, began to shake not only the Middle East but also the international system. While all of this required a new accounting, discussions on whether Russia would follow the Western direction or follow its own path intensified. Under these circumstances, Putin faced the first serious challenge to his rule when he announced his candidacy for the 2012 Presidential elections as the latter's representative.

As a result of the opposition led by different political movements, liberals and the Western clique within the state against Putin, intense street demonstrations took place, especially in big cities. Putin, who managed to overcome the demonstrations in which he stated that he was personally targeted by Western extensions such as Soros, paved the way for being elected President for two more terms, this time for six years, in 2012.

Putin, who maintained a distance from the West during this period due to the influence of the Syrian civil war, shaped his new team around this axis, but despite everything, he continued to maintain a balance with the West.

Although it would no longer burn bridges, it would have a foreign policy definition that would not hesitate to confront the USA and would become increasingly harsh.

The conflicts that started in Ukraine in 2014 led to a hardening of this attitude. However, since Russia was still selling her oil and gas mainly to the EU market, intensive relations with European states, especially Germany, were maintained. Even though the Russian political order was renewed with the constitutional amendments made in 2020 and the legal obstacle to Putin for the 2024 elections was removed, it was not clear whether Putin would run again. The real big break with the West occurred with the war that started in Ukraine in February 2022. Conditions became completely different when the EU came under the full control of the USA and the Russian economy was targeted with sanctions, and most importantly, critical energy pipelines for Russia such as Nord Stream were sabotaged.

Today, it would not be appropriate to talk about the first Putin in 2000 or even the second Putin in 2012.

In a period when Asia comes to the fore in the international system, unlike the previous ones, it would not be surprising to see a different Russia and its President. The multipolar world system that Russia has emphasized in its foreign policy concept for many years is now realistic.

Russia continues its Asian orientation with determination. Oil and gas sales, which are the main element of the country's integration into the world economy, are now mostly made to Asian markets instead of Europe. Moreover, East-West axis integration projects with Europe within the framework of the broad Eurasian partnership are being replaced by North-South axis transportation projects.

Partnership with China has increased in every field. Active participation is shown in structures such as BRICS, which are alternatives to Western institutions led by Beijing. The outlandish rhetoric expressed at the beginning of the Ukrainian war, such as that the Russian economy would be ruined and Putin would lose power, were negated by Moscow's countermeasures, such as dedollarization, which grasped the Asian era. On the contrary, it can be argued that the war in Ukraine resulted in Putin renewing his own vertical power bloc and recruiting new authority from there. The war in Ukraine, which Moscow officially calls 'Special Military Operation', has brought about the neutralization of centrifugal forces in terms of the system, as seen in examples such as the Wagner crisis, and has virtually transformed Russian politics. In today's Russia, unlike 2012, opposition to the regime may at best come from more hawkish and statist cliques rather than pro-Western groups. However, Putin still controls power with great public support.

In the third term, Putin and his team will differ in parallel with the changes in the world. To forecast what kind of policy Putin will follow in the new period, his ideas on three main issues can be considered.

The first of these is the construction of a power center that will directly oppose the West and NATO on the geopolitical/military level. As this happens, Moscow's interest in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union will increase. The events in the Ukrainian war and Putin's relevant statements give signs in this regard.

Secondly, it is useful to mention the debates about the identity of the state. While Russian officials begin to criticize Western values and frequently express the concept of a civilizational state in a more conservative tone, Putin's statement about Russian history is also noteworthy. Accordingly, referring to the situation in the Ukrainian war, it is an important break that Putin interpreted the policy of Nevsky, an important name in Russian history, and said that he defended the Russian state tradition by pledging allegiance to the Khans of the Golden Horde in the East against Western invaders. The mainstream reading of history in Russia has so far been Eurocentric, and the relevant period is viewed negatively as the Tatar-Mongol Yoke. However, Putin has moved closer to the perspective that sees this period as positive. As a matter of fact, Lev Gumilyov, one of the important names of the idea of Eurasianism, stated this thesis years ago, but remained alone. It is noteworthy that Putin officially supported Gumilyov's thesis in his capacity as President.

Thirdly, it is possible to talk about different pursuits in economic policy. The alternative economic model, led by economists such as Glazyev and prioritizing the real sector and emphasizing statism and equality, as opposed to the financial sector-oriented economic policies of Central Bank Governor Nabiullina, has not yet been fully accepted by the Kremlin,

but it is being expressed more and more strongly. This is the area where policy change is the most difficult.

The only thing that has not changed since the beginning of the 21st century is that Putin continues to govern his country with an unnamed coalition. What has changed is the structure of the coalition. While the international system is witnessing a rapid transition towards multipolarity, Russia is also taking its place in the new order. It will not be surprising to create appropriate policies and staff after the election. It is clear that there will be change in the three main issues mentioned above, but it is unclear how and to what extent. Time will tell. Nevertheless, it is certain that Putin and his Russia in 2024 will be different from the first term in 2000 and the second term in 2012.

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