

Policy Watch: Deng Xiao-Putin?

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Some light has finally been shed on the mystery of who will lead Russia after the expiration of Vladimir Putin's second term as president in 2008. Putin has long pledged that he will honor the Russian constitution's limit of serving only two four-year terms in this post. Uncertainty has abounded about who would succeed him and what that person's policy preferences would be, or whether Putin would alter the constitution (which he could easily do) in order to serve a third term.

In his televised answers to questions from the Russian public on Oct. 25, Putin insisted that he will leave office, but that he "will be able to exert influence on the life of our country and guarantee its development." There will, then, be a new Russian president as the constitution calls for, but who this is will not be all that important since Putin will continue to "exert influence."

The role Putin seems to envision for himself is similar to that played by Deng Xiaoping in China and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Both men formally gave up office, but continued to wield power and influence after doing so. In both countries, the ex-ruler sought to promote economic development, but not democratization. And in both cases, the ex-ruler was largely successful.

If Putin can pull it off, there are certainly advantages to playing this role than serving a third (or fourth) term as president. A president is responsible for everything that goes wrong, whereas an ex-president is not. A president can lose office, but an ex-president cannot. It would be highly convenient, then, to be a powerful enough ex-president to cause the downfall of a president and pick another one if the Russian public (or just Putin) is unhappy about the new president's policies.

But can Putin pull it off? There are obstacles. One is that the new president might not be satisfied with playing a weak role, and might try to get rid of Putin. Another is that if Putin does remain more powerful than any subsequent president, the Russian public is going to know this and ultimately hold him responsible if it really becomes unhappy about government policy.

Whether Putin can pull it off, or for how long, cannot be foretold. One thing, however, is certain: so long as Putin seeks to play this behind-the-scenes eminence grise role, Russian politics will not become any more democratic than they are now. Elections will have little meaning if all major decisions are subject to Putin's approval after he leaves office.

Will that matter? Singapore and China are examples of remarkably stable and prosperous authoritarian regimes (though there has been increasing unrest among China's have-nots). In South Korea, Taiwan, and Chile, though, authoritarian regimes that successfully pursued capitalist development ended up succumbing to their citizens' demand for democratization -- something that could still happen in Singapore or China some day.

It may well be that Russians are willing to forego democracy for a long time in exchange for prosperity. But there is no guarantee that an authoritarian Russia under Putin's indefinite supervision will become as prosperous as Singapore or China. These two countries manufacture and export a broad range of products to the rest of the world, whereas Russia's wealth is due to high oil prices. If oil prices fall and remain low for an extended period of time, Russia will be in serious economic trouble. Yet even -- indeed, especially -- if oil prices remain high, Russia is unlikely to reform its counterproductive business practices that inhibit foreign investment and

severely limit its economic development.

Putin could help Russia far more if he followed not just the letter, but the spirit of the Russian constitution, by letting Russian voters decide who they want to be their next president and retiring quietly when his term of office expires in 2008. The example for his successors that this would set is the best way he could achieve his stated goal to "exert influence" on the life of Russia and "guarantee its development" after he leaves office.

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