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Kirill Rogov

“A NEW PRINCE”:

**NON-DEMOCRATIC TRANSFER OF
POWER IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE**

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PART 1. AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALISM AND COMPETITIVE OLIGARCHY: THREE MODELS OF NON-DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION



Vladimir Putin, 2015 / UNIAN

According to the current Constitution, Vladimir Putin cannot run in the 2024 Russian presidential election. The norm limiting a person to two consecutive presidential terms first appeared in the 1991 reviewed Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), was then guaranteed by the 1993 Constitution¹, and was observed during the next two presidential tenures--Yeltsin's (from 1991 to 2000) and Putin's first one (from 2000 to 2008). Later, during Medvedev's presidency (from 2008 to 2012), the presidential term was extended to six years. Thus, Putin's second tenure will span 12 years and expire in 2024. What will happen next?

Putin's reelection in 2012 was marred by a tense atmosphere of mass protests provoked by wide-scale fraud during the 2011 parliamentary election and societal discontent about the prospect of Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin. These demonstrations along with the 2014 revolution in Ukraine have largely defined the evolution of the Putin regime in the 2010s. By 2018 the next presidential election in 2018, the Russian authoritarian regime looked much

¹ Today, this norm retains its original wording ("may not be elected...for more than two terms running") that first appeared in the constitutional amendments from May 24, 1991 introducing the office of the president of the RSFSR (article 121.2).

more consolidated. According to official estimates, Putin received 77 percent of the vote on 67.5 percent turnout, which accounted for more than half of all registered voters (51.8 percent). This was exactly the goal set by the presidential administration before the election. This result was supposed to provide Putin with a kind of ultra-legitimacy: he had not simply been elected head of state in accordance with the current Constitution and legislation--the impressiveness of his victory and its plebiscitary character allowed him to claim a legitimacy rivaling the constitutional one.

On March 19 of this year, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had led Kazakhstan for 30 years (since the Soviet times), announced his resignation. He later named Parliament Speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev candidate for presidency from the ruling party. The election will be held on June 9, and there is little doubt about its outcome. Nazarbayev himself will remain head of the National Security Council as well as leader of the ruling Nur Otan party for life, thus retaining much of his political power and resources.

In democratic systems, the transfer of power is subject to a strict procedure that is modified in extreme cases only; property rights on the whole are protected by the law; and voters are the ones who decide who will head the executive branch or will be included in the executive coalition. In non-democratic electoral systems, the procedure, property rights, and even voting results are to a far greater degree affected by arbitrary decisions of the head of the executive branch. Consequently, the irremovability of government and the preservation of power in the hands of the same executive coalition become the regime's key objective. This objective largely defines the logic of the regime's evolution, its tactical and personnel decisions. As a rule, the irremovability of government is achieved through manipulating the will of the voters. However, there are times when the executive coalition faces a greater challenge: the death (or incapacitation) of the coalition's leader, or constitutional restraints not allowing them to remain in office any longer. Such situations serve as crash-tests of sorts for non-democratic systems. Whether the system can or cannot handle such a challenge reveals the true weight and importance of its institutions, the actual balance of power within society and the elites, and the fundamental characteristics of this polity and the basic restrictions that it imposes.

In the first part of this work we intend to examine the cases of non-democratic transfer of power in the post-Soviet space, while in the second part we will discuss in detail the mechanisms of the emerging transition in Kazakhstan and possible scenarios of a similar transition in Russia.

Post-Soviet Systems: Personalistic Authoritarian Regimes and Competitive Oligarchies

In the 28 years since the achievement of independence, many countries that emerged in the post-Soviet space have faced the problem of ensuring the continuity of power. In order to understand the mechanisms that they used to solve this problem, it's important to first describe the types of political systems that have been forming in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The 12 post-Soviet countries—that is, former Soviet republics (excluding the Baltic states)—demonstrate rather distinctive examples of two main types of systems.² First of all, there are fairly consolidated authoritarian regimes of a personalistic nature. Generally speaking, personalistic regimes represent the most common and productive model of non-democratic rule in the modern world. In this respect, such regimes surpassed authoritarian single-party systems characteristic of the 20th century.³ Today, several “geographic” sub-types of personalistic regimes can be identified: the African sub-type, the Latin American, the Arab (which went through a systemic crisis in the early 2010s), and the post-Soviet sub-type. Regimes of the latter type include Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan in Central Asia, Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus, and Belarus and Russia in the European part of the former Soviet Union.

In these countries, all of which are presidential republics, regularly held elections do not result in the change of president and ruling party. In 28 years, 7 countries have seen 13 presidents, with their average tenure reaching 15 years. The average percentage of the vote received by the winner of presidential races over the last 12 years (on a country-by-country basis) has fluctuated from 70 to 98 percent. In the context of the Polity IV Project, all these countries have been described as autocratic regimes (with scores ranging from -6 to -10) except for Tajikistan (a closed anocracy, -3) and Russia (an open anocracy, -4). These estimates, however, date back to 2013. Freedom House’s freedom index deems these countries “Not Free” (scores ranging from 5.5 to 7.0) from the point of view of both political rights and civil liberties (see *Table 1*).

Professor Henry Hale describes such regimes as “single-pyramid patronal systems.” This means that the crucial role in power relations is played by the system of patronage (“patron-client” relations) that penetrates the entire social structure, producing a kind of patronal pyramid with a single personalistic leader at the top (president-patron).⁴

We are inclined to identify the second group of political systems as “competitive oligarchies.” Alternation of power is more frequent here, with a president’s average tenure reaching six years and the average result of a winner of presidential elections over the last 12 years ranging from 46 to 65 percent. Unlike in the first group of countries, elections do matter in these systems, and in most cases the outcome of elections is not known in advance. The Polity IV Project considers them to be democratic systems with the exception of Ukraine and Armenia (as of 2013). Freedom House’s assessment of political rights and civil liberties in these countries ranges from 3.0 to 4.6, which corresponds to the “Partly Free” status.

In literary works, this type of political systems is commonly defined as electoral democracies (meaning that they are not complete and entirely established, as

2 Henceforth, for the sake of brevity, we will be using the expression “post-Soviet space” to refer to the post-Soviet space excluding the Baltic states.”

3 Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz. “Autocratic breakdown and regime transitions: A new data set.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12.2 (2014): 313-331

4 Hale, Henry E. *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2014



Interstate Council Meeting of the Eurasian Economic Community, 2012 / UNIAN

opposed to liberal democracies). However, this definition is too vague and does not accurately describe the nature of these systems. In defining such political systems as competitive oligarchies, we use the term introduced by Robert Dahl while at the same time slightly altering the concept behind it. Dahl used this term to describe a system with a “high level of contestation but a low level of inclusiveness.”⁵In our interpretation of the term, a high degree of electoral competition in these countries goes side by side with weak civic organizations and political parties, a low degree of “rule of law” and, consequently, a high level of corruption affecting political institutions and tampering with the nature of democratic procedures. As a result, despite the high degree of electoral competition, various oligarchic groups (built into the executive branch or corrupting it from outside) become key players on the political arena. Henry Hale identifies such systems as patronal. However, unlike in the first group, there is no established single-pyramid system of patronage here but several patronal pyramid networks that compete for power and control over the executive branch.

As has already been mentioned, elections do matter in such systems but the weakness of civic control, the party system, and legal mechanisms opens up possibilities for manipulating legislation, administrative rights, and public resources. Access to mechanisms of manipulation turns specific oligarchic groups (patronal networks) into key players on the electoral arena.

Although practically all post-Soviet countries have or have had elected presidents, the degree of presidentialism—that is, the scope of the presidential authority—varies greatly. In consolidated authoritarian regimes, the degree of presidentialism is extremely high, while parliaments controlled by a “ruling party” serve as the clientele of the “executive coalition.” Countries belonging to the second group evolve toward the parliamentary system, gradually reducing the scope of the presidential authority. Moldova did not have an elected president from 2009 to 2016. By contrast, Armenia transitioned toward a parliamentary government (without a president elected by popular vote) in 2018. In 2018, in accordance with Georgia’s current legislation, the country elected its president for the last time. Following the reforms of the last decade in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, the scope of the presidential authority in these countries has been significantly reduced. This evolution came as a result of a high degree of electoral competition, the unpredictability of electoral outcomes, and revolutions. All the countries in the second group (competitive oligarchies) have lived through one or two “color revolutions” in the last 15 years.

5 Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971.

Table 1. Main Characteristics and Dynamics of Political Systems in Post-Soviet Countries

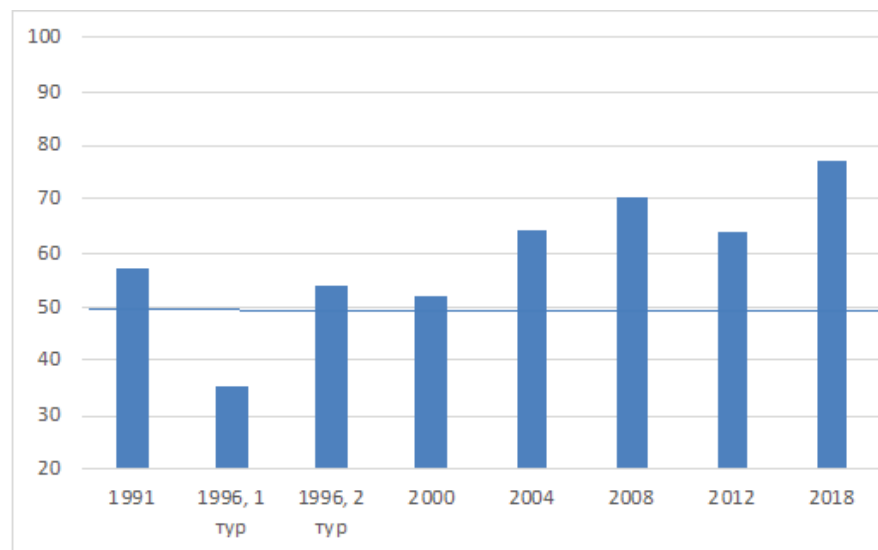
	<i>Dominance: Average percentage won by the winner of the presidential election</i>			<i>Alternation:</i>	<i>Poll standings</i>		
	<i>in the post-Soviet period</i>	<i>over the last 12 years</i>	<i>in the most recent election</i>	<i>number of presidents in the post-Soviet period</i>	<i>Polity IV</i>	<i>FH 2007-2019</i>	<i>FH 2019</i>
KAZAKHSTAN	91	97	98	1	-6	5.6	6.0
TURKMENISTAN	96	95	98	2	-8	7.0	7.0
UZBEKISTAN	90	90	89	2	-9	7.0	6.5
AZERBAIJAN	84	86	86	2	-7	5.9	6.5
TAJIKISTAN	75	82	84	2	-3	6.0	6.5
BELARUS	74	82	83	1	-7	6.5	6.5
RUSSIA	59	70	77	3	4	5.8	6.5
ARMENIA	58	56	59	3 (+1)*	5	4.6	4.0
KYRGYZSTAN	76	65	55	4 (+1)*	8	4.9	4.5
GEORGIA	73	58	60	5	7	3.3	3.0
MOLDOVA	56	50	52	4 (+1)*	9	3.2	3.5
UKRAINE	47	46	32 – 73*	5	4	3.0	3.5

* In Armenia, three presidents had been elected by popular vote before 2018 when the country turned into a parliamentary republic (without a president elected by popular vote), a new political setup in which former presidents do not hold key positions in the executive branch. In Kyrgyzstan, four presidents were elected by popular vote. Roza Otunbayeva was chosen by Parliament to hold the office of president from 2010 to 2012. Besides the four presidents who were elected by popular vote, from 2009 to 2016 Moldova functioned as a parliamentary republic (without a president elected by popular vote). Speaking of Ukraine's most recent presidential election, we provide the results of the leading candidate in both the first and the second rounds analyzing them in their entirety, and, considering the fact that the winner was a representative of the opposition, we believe that this election should be considered a competitive one.

As can be seen in *Table 1*, the distribution of countries between the two groups—personalistic authoritarian regimes and competitive oligarchies—varies with time, which is indicated by the average scores of the winners of presidential elections at different periods (see *Dominance section in Table 1*). Thus, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Kyrgyzstan had been evolving toward a personalistic authoritarian regime (under President Akayev), whereas over the last 12 years the country has been moving in the opposite direction. By contrast, from 1993 to the early 2000s, Russia had been moving toward a competitive oligarchy before it began turning into an increasingly authoritarian regime under President Putin, having first become a competitive authoritarian system (from the early 2000s to the early 2010s) and having later evolved toward a consolidated authoritarian system or an authoritarian hegemony.⁶

Up until 2000, the result of the winner of Russia’s presidential elections had remained in the competitive range from 50 to 60 percent. However, after 1991, not once has a candidate from the opposition won the election. During the next period the incumbent’s result ranged from 60 to 70 percent. Recurrent election results within this window reveal obvious inconsistencies in the distribution of resources and the fact that opposition candidates do not stand any chance of winning even hypothetically since the electoral outcome is known beforehand by all the participants in the process and by voters. They also signal that the opposition possesses certain resources and infrastructure and is legitimate in the eyes of both voters and the regime while independent media, though experiencing pressure, still have an established niche. In the mid-2010s Russia made a dramatic shift toward the “Central Asian” model: the independent media segment continued to shrink, new laws restricting civil rights were adopted, the degree of state-led repression increased drastically, and the result of the incumbent in presidential elections reached the range characteristic of authoritarian hegemonies (from 75 to 100 percent). However, it is important to mention Russia’s special “transit” place among post-Soviet authoritarian regimes: in Russia, the post-Soviet era can be divided into two roughly equal sub-periods, the first one marked by competition or pluralism (from 1991 to 2003) and the second one by authoritarianism (from 2004 to 2019).

Figure 1. Results of the Winners of Russia’s Presidential Elections from 1991 to 2018



Data of the Central Electoral Commission of the Russian Federation (<http://www.cikrf.ru>).

6 For the classification of authoritarian regimes and the concepts of competitive authoritarianism and authoritarian hegemony used here, see Levitsky, Steven, Lucan A. Way. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, see also Howard, Marc Morjé, and Philip G. Roessler. “Liberalizing electoral outcomes in competitive authoritarian regimes.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50.2 (2006): 365-381

In order to understand the political dynamics of post-Soviet countries it is necessary to take into account their key parameters and the dynamics of their economic development. In the 1990s all post-Soviet countries were experiencing a deep transformational recession which had a profound and dramatic impact on the process of formation of their polities and systems of government that coincided with the recession. In the late 1990s, all post-Soviet countries entered a period of intense growth (see Table 2). After the dramatic events of the early 1990s, the transformational recession, and the search for balance in domestic politics during the first post-Soviet decade, the economic growth of the 2000s in most of these countries contributed to the strengthening of the political system and power relations that had formed there by the late 1990s and the early 2000s. The exceptions were Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, which lived through a series of “color revolutions” from 2004 to 2006. These revolutions prevented the political systems of the first post-Soviet decade from taking a hold of these countries.

Table 2. Key Indicators of Economic Development of Post-Soviet Countries

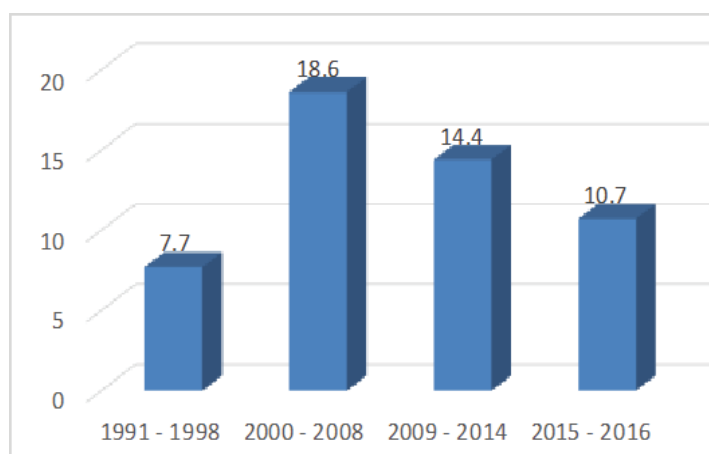
	Average growth rates, 2000-2008	Average growth rates, 2009-2017	Growth rates in 2018	GDP per capita, PPP based (constant 2011 international \$)	GDP per capita (current international \$)	Gross share of resource rent in GDP, 2000-2016 period average (percent of GDP)
KAZAKHSTAN	9.4	4.1	4.1	26435	9030	22.7
TURKMENISTAN	7.6	9.0	6.2	17993	6587	45.2
UZBEKISTAN	6.3	7.8	5.1	6865	1534	24.1
AZERBAIJAN	16.6	2.5	1.4	17398	4132	30.2
TAJIKISTAN	8.6	6.6	7.3	3195	801	1.3
BELARUS	8.0	1.5	3	18837	5728	1.6
RUSSIA	7.0	0.7	2.3	25533	10743	16.0
ARMENIA	11.2	2.0	5.2	9647	3937	2.2
KYRGYZSTAN	5.0	4.0	3.5	3726	1220	6.2
GEORGIA	7.0	3.9	4.8	10683	4057	1.2
MOLDOVA	5.9	3.3	4	5698	2290	0.2
UKRAINE	6.9	-1.8	3.4	8667	2640	6.2

Data: World Bank database, World development indicators (<https://data.worldbank.org>); the Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States (<http://www.cisstat.com>).

After the 2008 world crisis, economic growth rates remained high in only three authoritarian Central Asian countries: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (with average growth rates ranging from 6.6 to 9 percent from 2009 to 2017). Growth rates in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Moldova remained higher than the global average (from 3.3 to 4.1 percent). Economic growth in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine during this period slowed down most dramatically (from the average annual growth rate of 2.5 percent in Azerbaijan to -1.8 percent in Ukraine). Meanwhile the demand for change increased: so-called “color revolutions” took place in four out of five countries (in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, in Moldova in 2010, in Ukraine in 2014, and in Armenia in 2018) and mass anti-regime protests and sort-of-failed revolutions also took place in Belarus in 2011 and in Russia in 2011 and 2012.

Finally, it should be noted that consolidated authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space are mostly encountered in countries with a high share of resource rent in the economy (see Table 2, column 7). For Belarus, its special trade regime with Russia serves as the country’s rent source. The only exception is Tajikistan. Meanwhile, among all resource-reliant authoritarian regimes, Russia has the lowest share of resource rent, it being half as high as in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, almost two times lower than in Azerbaijan, and almost three times lower than in Turkmenistan. As is characteristic of all resource-dependent countries, the share of raw materials rent in the GDP varies with time, reflecting the volatile nature of raw material prices. However, in the case of Russia with its relatively low share of rent, these changes can turn out to be especially significant, as becomes clear in Figure 2, when in the 1990s the share of resource rent in the country’s GDP was not substantial (around 8 percent) whereas in the 2000s it reached 19 percent. This was the period during which the polycentric Russian political system was evolving toward a monocentric one, or, in Henry Hale’s terms, was forming as a single-pyramid patronal system. In the 2010s, the share of resource rent in Russia’s GDP decreased; in 2017 and 2018, it increased slightly thanks to a spike in the price of oil amid economic stagnation.

Figure 2. Share of Resource Rent in Russia’s GDP, by percentage



Data from the World Bank database, World development indicators (<https://data.worldbank.org>); average numbers for the specified period.

It is also worth mentioning that the divergence of economic trajectories of post-Soviet countries in the last decade cannot be explained by either their resource potential or their political system. In 2018, the authoritarian Tajikistan (not possessing any resources) and the resource-rich Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan demonstrated a growth of 5 to 7 percent; the “democratic” Georgia and Armenia, around 5 percent; and the resource-dependent authoritarian regimes in Azerbaijan and Russia, around 2 percent.⁷

⁷ Experts and even the Ministry of Economic Development consider the officially announced 2.3 percent economic growth in 2018 a statistical anomaly that does not correlate well with other indicators.

NON-DEMOCRATIC TRANSFERS OF POWER: DESPOTIC, ELECTORAL-ADMINISTRATIVE, AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFERS

With all the differences between post-Soviet countries, their political systems, development levels (\$801 per capita in Tajikistan compared to \$10,743 in Russia), economic dynamics, and other factors, it is worth reminding that their polities and statehoods were forming in a rushed manner amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the context of a deep transformational recession and alongside a mass and generally badly organized privatization of former state-owned property. These circumstances had a deep impact on their formation, the nature of political coalitions, law-enforcement systems, and new elites as well as on society's attitudes toward the law, private property, and government legitimacy.

The fact that after achieving independence all these countries became presidential republics was as a symptom of a rushed character of their statehoods (with the exception of Belarus which became a presidential republic in 1993). This reflected the wish to consolidate executive power on the republican level in response to the dysfunction and collapse of union structures. Meanwhile, the republics had virtually no political parties at the time. Furthermore, democracy being in fashion during the countries' transition from totalitarian regimes to electoral legitimacy, almost all presidential constitutions included a norm limiting the number of presidential terms.

Countries where consolidated personalistic authoritarian regimes were forming began by extending presidential terms and holding referendums to increase them (S.Niyazov, 1994; N. Nazarbayev, 1995; I. Karimov, 1995, 2002; A.Lukashenko, 1996; E. Rahmon, 1999, 2003) and later proceeded to abolish presidential term limits (S.Niyazov, 1994; N. Nazarbayev, 1998; A.Akayev, 2000; A.Lukashenko, 2004; I. Karimov, 2007; I. Aliyev, 2009). The length of time one person serves in office is in itself a key factor that contributes to the strengthening of the patrimonial system of government. After the abolishment of presidential term limits in these countries, presidency acquired a virtually lifelong character. More-consolidated authoritarian regimes introduced the title of the "leader of the nation" providing the head of state with lifelong tenure and extra electoral prerogatives (S.Niyazov, 1994, 1999; N. Nazarbayev, 2010; E. Rahmon, 2015).

The acuteness of the problem of continuity of power in authoritarian personalistic regimes is fairly obvious but it is also rather significant for the second group of political systems, that is, competitive oligarchies. This problem can be described briefly as the "Cinderella effect." The weakness of the justice system and of the civil and parliamentary control, the dependence of the law-enforcement system (including courts) on the executive branch, and legal abuse and corruption provide representatives of the executive coalition ample opportunities for redistributing assets and competing for financial profits. However, the carriage turns into a pumpkin as soon as control over the executive branch (and consequently over the law-enforcement system) is lost. Weak property rights represent an advantage and serve as an instrument of redistribution for members of the coalition but turn into a disadvantage as soon as one's place in this coalition is lost. These circumstances explain the repeated "authoritarianization" attempts in competitive oligarchies: the coalition that obtains control of the executive branch through elections strives to extend this control at the end of its tenure in order to preserve its "winnings." If the coalition manages to consolidate its dominant position, the country evolves toward a personalistic authoritarianism, as was the case with Belarus in the second half of the 1990s and with Russia in the 2000s. Otherwise, the country enters a kind of



Президенты в Театре, «Астана Опера» (Казахстан), 2013 / УНИАН

vicious circle of authoritarian regimes followed by revolutions, as happened, for instance, with Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine.⁸

In both types of political systems, property rights are guaranteed by the combination of formal and informal institutions with the former being essentially insufficient by themselves. Although the combination of formal and informal institutions also characterizes the models of non-democratic transfer of power used by these regimes, the role and weight of both types of institutions in authoritarian and pluralistic systems are considerably different.

Table 3 lists 13 attempts at carrying out non-democratic transfer of power in post-Soviet states over the last 20 years, with seven of them having been successful (at least in appearance) and five unsuccessful (one transfer has been defined as incomplete). All the cases can be narrowed down to one of three main models: 1) despotic, 2) administrative-electoral (the “successor” scenario), and 3) institutional; or combinations these three models.

The despotic model characterizes the transfer of power in consolidated authoritarian regimes where informal institutions play a key role while formal procedures (elections) only formalize the previously made decisions. The administrative-electoral model is known as the “successor” scenario: the incumbent president designates his successor who usually holds the office of prime minister or even acting president, which provides him with a significant administrative advantage. Although for this model elections do matter, their role can be more or less important depending on which sub-type is identified in such a transfer, the competitive or non-competitive sub-type. Finally, the institutional model relies primarily upon formal institutions and implies the retention of power in the hands of a specific person and a coalition close to him by altering the constitutional structure and redistributing power and authority to the advantage of specific bodies and institutions (this most often means a transition toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential republic).

8 For regime cycles in these countries see Henry Hale Op.cit.

Table 3. Non-Democratic Transitions in Post-Soviet Countries

<i>Regime type</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Length of the "Patron" tenure</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Level of success of the transition</i>	<i>Results and supporting institutions of transition</i>
Consolidated personalistic authoritarian regimes	AZERBAIJAN	10 (1993) G. Aliyev	2003	successful	Despotic; continuity of power achieved; key institution-- "Family"
	TURKMENISTAN	15 (1991) S.Niyazov	2006	successful	Despotic; limited continuity of power achieved; key institution--"siloviki"
	UZBEKISTAN	25 (1991) I. Karimov	2016	successful	Despotic; continuity not achieved, redistribution of power; key institution-- "siloviki"
	KAZAKHSTAN	28 (1991) N. Nazarbayev	2019	incomplete	Despotic, institutional Shift of government structure, "Family," "siloviki"
Unconsolidated regimes	RUSSIA*	9 (1991) B.Yeltsin	2000	successful	Administrative-electoral (successor), partial continuity, partial redistribution; institutions-- "Family," elections, "siloviki"
	UKRAINE	9 (1993) L.Kuchma	2003 - 2004	unsuccessful	Institutional: attempt at transitioning toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential form of government
	UKRAINE	10 (1994) L.Kuchma	2004	unsuccessful	Administrative-electoral (successor), competitive
	RUSSIA	8 (2000) V.Putin	2008	successful	Administrative-electoral (successor), noncompetitive
	ARMENIA	10 (1998) R. Kocharyan	2008	successful	Administrative-electoral (successor), competitive
	GEORGIA	8 (2004) M. Saakashvili	2010 - 2012	unsuccessful	Institutional Transition toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential form of government
	RUSSIA	4 (2008) D. Medvedev	2012	problematic	Administrative-electoral (successor), noncompetitive
	KYRGYZSTAN	5 (2012) A.Atamayev	2017	unsuccessful	Administrative-electoral and institutional (reduced presidential authority)
	ARMENIA	10 (2008) S.Sargsyan	2018	unsuccessful	Institutional, transition toward the parliamentary form of government

Despotic Transfers of Power: Successors, Viziers, and Janissaries

The despotic transfer of power is characteristic of countries with a consolidated personalistic authoritarian regime. Its distinctive feature is the selection of the next ruler by a small group of people through informal and closed-door procedures, with formal procedures holding very little significance at this stage. Three transitions of this type took place in 2003 in Azerbaijan, where Heydar Aliyev successfully handed power over to his son; as well as in Turkmenistan (2006) and Uzbekistan (2016) where previous dictators died in office.

Azerbaijan, 2003. During his ten-year rule, Heydar Aliyev established a considerably consolidated personalistic authoritarian regime.⁹ His son Ilham was first vice president of a **state-owned oil company**, and in 2001 he also became his father’s deputy in the country’s “**ruling**” **New Azerbaijan Party**. In the spring of 2003, six months before the next election, the health of Heydar Aliyev deteriorated sharply. In July, he and his son Ilham became presidential candidates. In August, Ilham Aliyev became **prime minister**, and 14 days before the election, Heydar Aliyev withdrew his candidacy. As a result, Ilham received 79.5 percent of the vote. Thus, Azerbaijan became the first successful case of transfer of power **within the family** in the post-Soviet space. Ilham Aliyev later carried out a series of constitutional amendments including the abolishment of term limits for the office of president and the introduction of the office of “first vice-president” that in 2017 was assumed by Ilham’s wife Mehriban Aliyeva.

Turkmenistan, 2006. Saparmurat Niyazov, the creator of the most authoritarian personalistic regime in the post-Soviet space, died from a heart attack at the age of 66. Despite the fact that his condition had become apparent several months before, Niyazov had not taken any public steps to designate his successor. Under the Turkmen Constitution, power was supposed to be transferred to Majlis chairman Ovezgeldy Atayev. However, Atayev was arrested the day Niyazov died, and **Deputy Prime Minister** and Minister of Health Berdymukhammedov was named acting president by the **State Security Council** (it was Niyazov himself who had held the office of prime minister). Consequently, some experts qualify the events of December 21 and 22 as a coup d’etat. In February 2017, Berdymukhammedov was elected president with 89.2 percent of the vote. A few months after the election, Berdymukhammedov dismissed Akmurad Redzhepov, the head of the presidential security service, along with his son, as well as the head of the Interior Ministry, Redzhepov’s close associate. Redzhepov, who had headed the presidential security service during Saparmurat Niyazov’s rule, was believed to be the country’s most influential figure and was undoubtedly behind the transfer of power to Berdymukhammedov. Niyazov’s **cult of personality** has gradually shifted to Berdymukhammedov’s.

Uzbekistan, 2016. Another creator of a tough personalistic regime, Islam Karimov, similarly to Niyazov, moved to the presidential office directly from the position of the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, and, just like his Turkmen counterpart, failed to designate a successor despite his advanced age of 78. Also just as in Turkmenistan, the Uzbek Constitution mandates that if the president dies or becomes incapacitated, executive power transfers to the chairman of Uzbekistan’s Senate. However, the Senate leader declined this role and gave the power over to Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who had been holding the office of **prime minister** since 2003. Three months later, Mirziyoyev was elected president of Uzbekistan with the official count at 88.6 percent of the vote. According to experts, Rustam Inoyatov, the head of Uzbekistan’s all-powerful **National Security Service**

9 Before returning to power in 1993, Aliyev had led the Soviet Azerbaijan from 1969 to 1982 as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party.

who had the country's entire security vertical under his control, must have played a key role in the transfer of power to Mirziyoyev. One month after the inauguration, Mirziyoyev's son-in-law Otabek Shakhonov became head of the **presidential security service**. In the second half of 2017, Mirziyoyev and the **media** began criticizing the ways of the old regime and specifically the siloviki's omnipotence and abuse of power. The country's interior minister, close to Inoyatov, was dismissed, and the prosecutor's office was purged of officials accused of corruption. In January 2018, head of the National Security Service Inoyatov was dismissed and the agency itself was subject to reform and purging. At the same time, the reexamination of the former political course was gaining momentum. Mirziyoyev carried out a number of reforms aimed at liberalizing the domestic policy (such as the abolishment of visas, the liberalization of currency regulations and exports, and measures to support business).

Summing up these cases of despotic transfer of power, we come to several stunning conclusions. First of all, they were all successful and relatively "easy" in the sense that the departure of the former leader due to incapacitation did not result in any turmoil in the form of either a long-lasting struggle for power and confrontation within the elites or mass unrest and lack of stability. In this sense, traditional arguments about the vulnerability of personalistic regimes during transition periods seem to be exaggerated. Second, the concept itself of a personalistic regime should be adjusted. As it becomes clear from the above-mentioned cases, the combination of formal and informal institutions created by the personalistic regime continues to function smoothly while the figure of the leader at the top of the "patronal pyramid" can be easily replaced with a new one. The new leader receives the same 90 percent of the vote and his image quickly replaces the previous icon on TV screens, stamps, and billboards. In other words, when the role of elections is reduced to its minimum, the regime relies on the "patronal pyramid" itself—not on the figure or personality of the patron.

It turned out that the key factors ensuring the transfer of power are the "security vertical"; the institution of "Family"; the position of "prime minister"; control over the ruling party that always formally nominates the incumbent, who has already been serving as acting president or prime minister prior to the election, as the only real candidate for the presidential post; and, finally, electoral legitimacy. In the case of Azerbaijan, the "Family" has always been the key institution guaranteeing the continuity of power. In the cases of Niyazov and Karimov, the "siloviki" managed to block access to power to "Family" contenders when the dictators were still alive. Meanwhile, the new president of Uzbekistan makes ample use of the "Family" factor: his daughter and two sons-in-law hold key positions in the structures of the executive branch.

Despite the seeming easiness with which one personalistic leader can be replaced with another one, despotic transitions do not appear to be particularly beneficial to influential figures of the previous regime who often play an important or even crucial role in ensuring political and strong-arm support of the transfer of power. This pertains not only to the cases of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but also to that of Azerbaijan. In 2005, two years after the election, Ilham Aliyev, who largely managed to maintain the continuity of power in terms of both the political course and the informal distribution of resources between different influence groups,¹⁰ uncovered a "plot" designed against him by a group of influential officials including the economy, finance, and health ministers.¹¹ This strong-arm move demonstrated

10 The return of Artur Rasizade, who had served as prime minister during most of Heydar Aliyev's rule before ceding his post to Ilham Aliyev for the "transitional period" in 2003, to the premiership can be seen as a symbol of this continuity.

11 See for example: International Crisis Group. AZERBAIJAN: VULNERABLE STABILITY. Europe Report N°207 – 3 September 2010 (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/4c84c1b52.html>).

the new president’s absolute power by showing that he was not just the guarantor of the balance of power that had been established under his father but that he was entirely in charge.

Despotic transfers of power in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan show that informal institutions play a much more crucial role than formal ones during transitions (the constitutional procedure of the transfer of power has been violated in both cases). Later, however, after the successor has been formally legitimized and has adopted the “institutional charisma” of his predecessor (almost always reinforced by the indispensable cult of personality), the all-powerful “siloviki” retreat before this legitimacy and their downfall marks the end of the transition. In Uzbekistan, partial liberalization and the adjustment of the political course supported by public criticism of the law-enforcement corporation and its political role under the previous regime served as mechanisms of public legitimization of the new leader. Thus, under a despotic transfer of power, the old system of government as a whole usually remains unchanged but key players are almost always replaced along with the leader himself.

Administrative-Electoral Model: The “Successor” Scenario

The administrative-electoral model of the transfer of power (the “successor” scenario) is used in those systems where the abolishment of presidential term limits is either impossible or too risky. It is characteristic of pluralistic systems (competitive oligarchies) and semi-authoritarian (competitive authoritarian) regimes. This model, at the center of which are public electoral procedures, emerges as a result of tougher restraints (the impossibility to overturn a constitutional norm) and a higher pressure on government structures from “below.” However, the absence of the rule of law, the arbitrary nature of law enforcement, and, consequently, the importance of informal institutions and patronal networks significantly influence the quality of these procedures and give ample opportunities for manipulations.

Six such cases have been described in *Table 3*: the transfer of power from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin in 2000; the attempt at transferring power from Leonid Kuchma to Viktor Yanukovich in 2004; the transfer of power from Robert Kocharyan to Serzh Sargsyan in 2008; the transfer of presidency from Vladimir Putin to Dmitri Medvedev in 2008 and vice versa in 2012; and Kyrgyzstan’s most recent presidential election in 2017.

The best-known case, the transfer of power from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, clearly demonstrates formal and informal institutions of support in this type of transition. Yeltsin first appointed a young, little-known bureaucrat **FSB director and secretary of the Russian Security Council**, and then **prime minister**. His **popularity** was growing fast in the context of bombings by groups of terrorists of Caucasus origin and the beginning of the Second Chechen War (the “rally ‘round the flag” effect). The president’s “**Family**”—his daughter and presidential adviser Tatyana Yeltsina and his chief of staff Valentin Yumashev—played an important role in selecting a successor. The “Family” coordinated the pool of “oligarchs,” that is representatives of major private businesses who supported the “successor.” As a result of the December 1999 parliamentary election, the United Russia **Party** led by Putin formed the second largest faction in Russia’s parliament. A few months before the end of his term, Yeltsin announced his resignation, and in accordance with the Constitution, the prime minister became **acting president**, meaning that, just like in the despotic transfer of power model, he was already in office before being formally elected. With the help of electoral support and administrative resource, Putin received 52 percent of the vote. His victory in the first round was made possible by the decision of his main rival group—the alliance between former Prime Minister

Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov—not to put forward their candidate for the presidential post. This decision in turn came as a result of both Putin’s quickly growing popularity and pressure by the media and the Yeltsin-Putin informal group that led to an unofficial agreement between the two groups.

The institutional recipe for the notorious “Operation Successor” is as follows: the security vertical, the “Family,” administrative advantages (incumbency before the elections), the support group of oligarchs and business representatives, the incumbent’s party, the media, high popularity, and the “rally ‘round the flag” effect. As we can see, administrative and public policy mechanisms are all mixed up here and closely interconnected. In the context of a split “executive coalition” the winner is the candidate with a larger number of appearances on both public and nonpublic stages.

Just like in Russia in 1999 and 2000, the executive coalition in Ukraine at the end of Leonid Kuchma’s second term was split, and consequently the position of **prime minister** occupied by the president’s would-be successor Viktor Yanukovich provided only a relative and meager advantage. Unlike Putin, Yanukovich lacked charisma, could not use the “rally ‘round the flag” effect, and ran for presidency in a polarized electoral environment that is traditional for Ukraine. His alleged victory led to **mass unrest** that was later dubbed the “Orange Revolution,” and he subsequently lost the third-round vote. In this case, electoral factors (public policy factors) turned out to be more significant than administrative ones.

The 2008 presidential elections in Armenia and Russia were held against the backdrop of an impressive **economic success** that both countries were experiencing throughout the 2000s. This not only created a favorable social climate (enjoying the first decade of the post-Soviet stability, voters did not see any need for change) but also allowed the consolidation of the “executive coalition.” Under Robert Kocharyan’s rule, Serzh Sargsyan, the president’s longtime associate from the time of the Karabakh conflict, held the position of **defense minister** and **chairman of the National Security Council** as well as key positions in the **Republican Party of Armenia**, and became prime minister two years before the expiration of Kocharyan’s second term. The election was marked by high levels of competition, and Sargsyan won with 53 percent of the vote. **Mass demonstrations** against this victory organized by the opposition were suppressed with force.

In Russia, then-First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was elected with Putin’s support; Putin, as it had been announced before the election, was going to hold the post of prime minister and leader of the ruling party. As in Armenia, the election was held under the “continuity and stability” slogan and against the backdrop of citizens’ high contentment with the achievements of the previous government. Meanwhile the election in Russia was non-competitive and marked by a heavy use of administrative resource. According to Russian data analyst Sergei Shpilkin, out of 52.5 million votes for Dmitri Medvedev (70 percent of all those who voted) almost 11 million were “irregular” which means that they were very likely fraudulent. Unlike in Armenia, there was no competition during the election.

The reverse election that was held in 2012 and as a result of which Vladimir Putin took over from Dmitri Medvedev as head of state was also non-competitive, yet it took place in the context of a sharp decline in public trust in the government and was marked by mass protests against the fraudulent 2011 parliamentary election and Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin. The scope of election fraud was smaller than during the previous election but nevertheless significant, and Vladimir Putin’s adjusted result was around 57 percent of the vote instead of the officially announced 63.6 percent. This transfer of power was also non-competitive but led to complications (mass demonstrations, tensions within the elites). Thus, it demonstrated the limited durability of the regime as it appeared by the end of the 2000s.

As becomes clear from this review, the administrative-electoral model of transfer of power (the “successor” scenario) can be used in two types of systems: competitive ones (in which electoral procedures play a significant role) and non-competitive ones (which put a special emphasis on the use of administrative resources). In two out of six cases, this scenario of transfer of power ended up in a failure (Ukraine, 2004; Kyrgyzstan, 2017, this case will be mentioned later); in one case success was achieved albeit with complications (Russia, 2012), and in three cases this transfer was accompanied by mass protests (Ukraine, 2004; Armenia, 2008; Russia, 2012). Success factors are:

- The level of consolidation of the executive branch (executive coalition);
- The level of control over law-enforcement structures and the media;
- The “successor” electoral potential (his popularity); and
- The social and economic situation and the perception thereof by citizens.

If at first glance (from the point of view of the new leader) most transfers were still successful, from the point of view of the “patron” and elites close to him, the results of using this model appear to be rather contradictory. Thus, having largely reconsidered Boris Yeltsin’s political heritage, Vladimir Putin stripped many influential groups of the Yeltsin elite of authority, influence, and assets. Even his own experience with this model from 2008 to 2012 turned out to be far from serene despite the fact that he retained all key informal and formal mechanisms (position of prime minister and party leadership). If the competitive model of “succession” seems risky due to the unpredictability of electoral behavior and citizens’ protest activity, the non-competitive one is fraught with risks of disloyalty of the successor and elites that begin forming the clientele pool of the new formal leader. There are the same risks here that we have seen in the context of the despotic model. The Kyrgyz scenario of “succession” that will be described below proves this point.

The Institutional Model: Failures of Opportunistic Parliamentarism

The third model of non-democratic transfer of power in the post-Soviet space, the institutional model, involves altering the political and legal format of government so that the leader restricted by the Constitution from running for a new term can remain at the head of the executive branch. All four attempts at carrying out this scheme turned out to be unsuccessful. (Certain elements of this scenario were used during the transfer of power in Russia in 2008)

The first attempt at transitioning toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential republic as a way to bypass the problem of the “third term” was made by President Leonid Kuchma at the end of 2003. The bill (No.4105) that would on the one hand provide the president with rather ample powers and on the other hand introduce the election of the president by Verkhovna Rada members came within six votes to becoming a law (a similar model of constitutional governmental structure existed in Moldova from 2000 to 2016). After that, Kuchma relied on the “successor” scenario and lost.

In 2010, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili carried out a reform turning Georgia into a mixed parliamentary-presidential republic. Even though under the new Constitution the president is elected by direct vote, it is the prime minister who becomes the actual head of the executive branch. The Georgian opposition accused Saakashvili of introducing this amendment in order to remain in power after the expiration of his second presidential term in 2013 (in 2005, after becoming president, Saakashvili introduced changes strengthening presidential authority). However, Saakashvili’s party lost the 2012 parliamentary

election, and the president left the country even before the end of his term, fearing persecution by the opposition.

Like in Georgia, President Serzh Sargsyan and his Republican Party of Armenia successfully carried out a constitutional reform aimed at moving the country toward the parliamentary system (with a strong prime minister relying on the parliamentary majority, and a president elected by lawmakers). However, the appointment of Sargsyan to the post of prime minister after the expiration of his presidential term resulted in mass protests that grew into a revolution.

The transfer of power in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 combined elements of the “successor” scenario and the institutional model. After the 2010 revolution, a norm was introduced in the Constitution allowing for only one five-year presidential term. Such a format is characteristic of many Latin American countries and promotes the development of the “ruling party” institution. Eighteen months before the end of his tenure, President Almazbek Atambayev appointed Sooronbay Jeenbekov prime minister and later made sure he was put forward as a presidential candidate from the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) that he heads. At the same time, Atambayev introduced amendments to the Constitution strengthening the prime minister’s authority. Atambayev’s main resource, the parliamentary coalition with SDPK at its center represents the majority in parliament. Thus, beside the “successor” scenario, Atambayev also carried out institutional changes aimed at reducing presidential authority and turning the parliamentary majority into an actual “ruling party” responsible for controlling both the prime minister and the government through parliament.

However, this plan is currently failing. Jeenbekov slipped out of his patron’s control and began ousting and persecuting some of Atambayev’s associates using the “fight-against-corruption” rhetoric. In this situation, a segment of the SDPK faction in parliament shifted its loyalty and declared its support for the president while Atambayev was forced to announce that he was joining the opposition to the president. The outcome of the confrontation should be decided by the 2020 parliamentary election.

All in all, the unreliability of this model of power preservation seems to come as a result of weak party systems and ruling parties. The role of tradition and ideology in securing the loyalty of voters toward these parties is not significant enough, whereas the role of ties to the executive branch is crucial in securing their influence. Voters see parties as clients of executive coalitions and consequently do not consider party governments to be particularly legitimate.

This review of different types of non-democratic transfer of power allows us to identify key institutions that play the most important role in these transfers and give insight into the structure of post-Soviet systems of government, both authoritarian and pluralistic ones.

The security and law-enforcement vertical is obviously one of the most important institutions. Beside the fact that violence control is at the core of any statehood, specific purposes of state violence can be identified in post-Soviet countries. They have been determined by these countries’ birth trauma: the dramatic privatization under the conditions of an either weak or strong, but invariably despotic public order. As a result, the population believes that property managed by individuals is likely to be illegal. It not only needs the constant protection of law-enforcement bodies but remains an object of potential redistribution. Corruption and the fight against corruption are two components of the same mechanism used to constantly redistribute property and maintain the loyalty of elites with positive (corruption) and negative (accusations of corruption) stimuli. These mechanisms, based on arbitrary law



Mikheil Saakashvili, 2017 / UNIAN

enforcement, make it possible to form and readjust informal clienteles and “patronal pyramids.”

The security and law-enforcement vertical usually has the National Security Service (the legacy of the Soviet KGB) at its core and implies the subordinate status of the prosecutor’s office and courts in relation to the executive branch. Its main duty, however, is to control the elites—not to suppress the opposition. The desire to consolidate the security and law-enforcement vertical is reflected by the growing influence of bodies similar to the Russian Security Council in many countries.

At the same time, we have seen that the “siloviki,” who may appear all-powerful in despotic regimes, usually have a weak potential for public legitimization. Meanwhile, as becomes clear from the transfer of power in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, formal procedures and electoral legitimacy are important even in those countries where the role of elections is purely nominal. In countries with competitive systems, the “siloviki”’s role is limited due to a higher significance of formal and electoral procedures, the non-consolidated nature of the executive coalition, and the presence of free media. However, the “siloviki”’s influence is still considerable in these countries, and oligarchic groups are constantly fighting for control over positions and segments of the law-enforcement system.

The media, which have not received adequate attention in this review, nonetheless play a huge role. Beside the fact that control over the media helps shape the public’s view of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the regime,¹² the media also represent a crucial resource in the fight between the elites. Media campaigns are responsible for the success (Putin, 2000) or failure (Saakashvili, 2012) of non-democratic transfers of power in competitive oligarchies. In authoritarian regimes, the media shape the leader’s cult of personality, which serves as an important source of legitimacy, and can also be

12 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman. How modern dictators survive: An informational theory of the new authoritarianism. No. w21136. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015.

used to redistribute spheres of influence and to readjust the power balance (as it happened for instance in Uzbekistan where public criticism of the abuse of power by the “siloviki” was an element of the campaign to purge the “security vertical”).

The significance of the “Family” institution demonstrates a crucial role of informal institutions, “trust networks,” and personal loyalty. However, the “Family” institution can also be an irritating factor for the population and the elites, undermining the leader’s legitimacy as was the case with the collapse of Akayev’s regime in Kyrgyzstan. The post of prime minister, which gives access to budget resources and regulatory powers, proves to be an important element of non-democratic transitions. In a non-democratic transfer of power it is this post that usually serves as a springboard to the presidency. Finally, although “ruling parties” often do not rule but act as clienteles of the executive coalition or its factions, they play an important role in the control over legislative activities and formal procedures. The inability to control the parliament is usually a dependable indicator rather than the reason of the inability of the ruling coalition to maintain power.

In general, the different types of non-democratic transfer of power described here reflect the fundamental characteristics and limitations of corresponding polities: the ratio of formal to informal institutions, the degree and rules of competition between elite groups, and the degree of involvement of the general public in the political decision-making process. Although in competitive oligarchies, institutions and organizations that make this engagement possible are underdeveloped and corrupt, the population still gets involved in the competition between the elites by putting forward its own agenda. In consolidated authoritarian regimes this engagement is minimal or insufficient to make a difference.

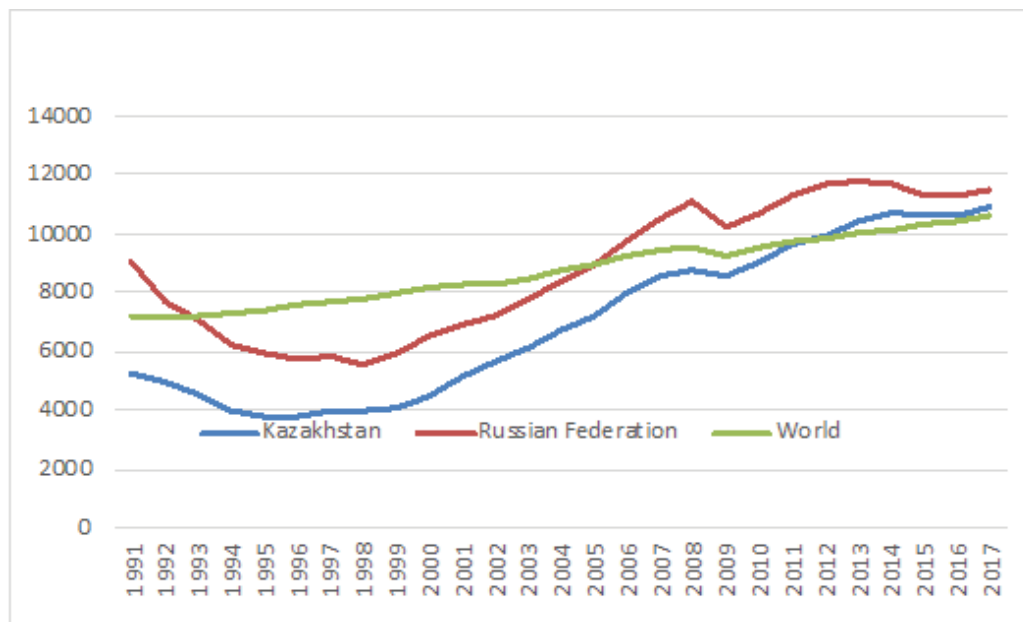
PART 2. KAZAKHSTAN-2019 AND RUSSIA-2024: IN SEARCH OF NON-ELECTORAL LEGITIMACY

Security and People Power: Unfinished Transition in Kazakhstan

The initiated transfer of power in Kazakhstan is of crucial importance to the entire post-Soviet space. Seventy-nine-year-old Nursultan Nazarbayev is the last of the first secretaries of the Communist Party who became presidents of independent nations in 1992. At the same time, Nazarbayev’s Kazakhstan appears to be one of the most successful personalistic regimes in the post-Soviet space and indeed the entire world. Today, Kazakhstan’s GDP per capita has almost reached Russia’s, whereas in 1991 it was only half of Russia’s (see Figure 3). The authoritarian political model and the neopatrimonial social system that is traditional for such countries go hand in hand with the regime’s distinct modernization aspirations. This is why the transfer mechanism that is being used in Kazakhstan and its results will be considered as a model case for “enlightened authoritarianisms.”

The scenario of Kazakhstan’s transition includes both well-known elements and new ones but most importantly it is consistent, which means that the personalistic leader is trying to establish a system of safeguards and balances before becoming incapacitated.

Figure 3. GDP per Capita in Russia, Kazakhstan, and the World (constant 2010 US\$)



Data from the World Bank Database

On March 19, 2019, Nazarbayev announced his resignation, and, in accordance with the Kazakh Constitution, Speaker of the Senate Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev assumed presidential powers (Tokayev had held the position of Senate leader since 2007 with a break from 2011 to 2013).



Nursultan Nazarbayev, 2015 / UNIAN

Meanwhile, Nazarbayev's daughter Dariga became Chairwoman of the Senate, i.e., the person who replaces the president in the event of his resignation or incapacitation. During the Nur Otan party convention that was held on April 24, Nazarbayev put forward Tokayev's candidacy for president of Kazakhstan, receiving unanimous backing from convention delegates.

Several waves of legislative changes preceded this transfer of power. The constitutional law "On the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan - Elbasy ("Leader of the Nation")" first adopted in 2000 has been repeatedly amended, providing the first president with more and more guarantees and prerogatives, the most important being the right to head the country's Security Council for life (amendment from 12.22.2017 No.119-VI). Meanwhile, the final version of the law on the Security Council adopted in 2018 considerably expanded the scope of authority of this body. Moreover, Nazarbayev remains leader of the Nur Otan party ("Radiant Fatherland").

Thus, the Kazakh transition combines elements of the "successor" scenario with elements of the despotic ("Family," "siloviki"), and institutional (redistribution of powers) models of non-democratic transfer of power. Nazarbayev has received the life-long authority to control the "security vertical" as well as the parliament (through the ruling party) while his daughter has assumed the No.3 position in the nation's political hierarchy and can claim the presidency in the event of Tokayev's resignation or incapacitation. As usual, President Tokayev assumed office before being elected. On the other hand, he did not move to this position from the post of prime minister which is traditional for post-Soviet transfers of power. After serving as minister of foreign affairs, Tokayev has not held any other positions in the government since 2007, which means that he lacks the necessary experience and clientele in business management structures, and suggests that the head of his cabinet will be playing a more important and somewhat independent role. As party leader, Nazarbayev also virtually holds control over the position of prime minister (the amendments to the Constitution adopted in 2007 stipulate that a candidate for prime minister has to be confirmed by parliamentary vote).

Thus, unlike in well-known cases, Nazarbayev is "breaking up" the

presidential power not just into two components (president and prime minister) but into three (president, head of the Security Council, and prime minister) or even four, considering that the functions of the Senate chaired by Nazarbayev's daughter include, for instance, the approval of candidacies for the chairperson of the National Bank, the Prosecutor General, the chairperson and the judges of the Supreme Court, and, interestingly, the chairperson of the Committee of National Security. This design should provide him with almost total control over the situation. It also looks solid enough unless and until Nazarbayev is incapacitated. As Arkady Dubnov, a Russian political analyst and expert on Central Asia, noted, this is when the real transfer of power will begin.

Nazarbayev will be unable to transfer his legitimacy as Elbasa ("Leader of the Nation") to anyone, and the "dual key" control system of the security vertical will stop functioning. Nazarbayev may try to create a second power pole by transferring the control over the Nur Otan party to representatives of a competitive elite group in order to counterbalance the power of the elected president (for example, to ensure the interests of his family). However, as the Kyrgyzstan case has demonstrated, it is difficult to maintain control over a party without access to law-enforcement mechanisms.

In the Kazakh scenario, the post of head of the Security Council serves as an instrument of control over the security vertical. However, we are talking about more than just supervision of security corporations. Two laws—one on the republic's national security and one on the Security Council—clarify the ideology of the institutional aspect of the Kazakh transition. The law on the Security Council gives the president the right to head this body for life and describes the scope of the chairman's authority which is broad but not limitless. For instance, although the Council is formed by the president, its composition has to be approved by the chairman of the Council. (Thus, the actual influence of both the former and the latter in this process will be defined by their informal authority and might change over the years). The functions of the Council include for instance the discussion of candidacies for top positions of central and local executive bodies directly subordinate to the president, and the distribution of subsoil plots. These powers of the president and the government also turn out to be secured by the "dual key" control system. And finally, the decisions of the Council and its chairman (!) "are mandatory and are subject to strict execution by state bodies, organizations, and officials" (Chapter 2, article 6, clause 6).

The law on national security, in its turn, establishes a so-called "broad definition of national security" in the interests of protecting the national sovereignty that covers basically everything. It provides a detailed list of all threats to national security in all areas as well as responsibilities of appropriate bodies to counter them. Like in the Russian president's speeches, the notions of "national security" and "sovereignty" grow into kind of value-based universals that counterbalance and restrict other value-based universals including democracy (people power) and human rights. The manipulation of threats and of notions of "security" and "sovereignty" forms a populist base for reducing the global importance of open-society values.

These two laws show not only the institutional framework of the transition but also the ideology behind it. The Security Council and its life-long chairman are similar to "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," the ayatollahs. This is something that is above the "will of the people" and possesses its own doctrinal legitimacy. This is why the president elected by the people ends up with a sort of "down-sized" mandate leaving some powers to the body responsible for maintaining "sovereignty" and "security" and representing this doctrinal (extra-electoral) legitimacy.

In many countries of the world—not just in Russia and Kazakhstan—“security” and “sovereignty” are increasingly being considered as super-values that push aside and lower the priority of people power and human rights values. This ideological trend not only alters the balance and hierarchy of commonly accepted values and serves as a means to legitimize authoritarian regimes in the public mind but also promotes the trend of toughening the existing authoritarian regimes and legitimizes the process of their further authoritarianization. This aspect of Kazakhstan’s transition directly relates to Russia and the rearrangement of the country’s structure of power that is expected to happen there in the coming years.

RUSSIA-2024: FOUR BASIC SCENARIOS

Vladimir Putin, still a relatively young leader, can expect to have another 10 to 12 years of a more or less active political career. In this regard, being exactly 12 years Nazarbayev’s junior, Putin is very different from the Kazakh leader. His ambition, the degree of personal risk he takes, and his awareness of threats suggest that, unlike his predecessor Boris Yeltsin who at the time was only two years older than Putin is today, the current Russian president is unlikely to retire any time soon or leave office on his own accord. However, we are not trying to guess either Putin’s intentions or the solution to the “2024 problem” that will eventually be chosen (this decision has probably not yet been made). This work discusses the possibilities (available options) and probabilities (limitations and advantages) of different scenarios in the context of the institutional structure of post-Soviet political systems and the dynamics of Russia’s regime of the last two decades.

Our review of post-Soviet non-democratic transfers of power makes it clear that the task that Vladimir Putin is facing is by no means simple or trivial. Five out of twelve reviewed cases of non-democratic transfers of power in the post-Soviet space were unsuccessful, and in at least three cases (Russia, 2000, Turkmenistan, 2006, and Uzbekistan, 2016) the outcome of the transfer of power was very different from the expected and desired one. Thus, only every third planned scheme was carried out successfully. Moreover, the last decade of world history has demonstrated yet again the relevance of the well-known effect of the “unexpectedness of revolutions”: during the “Arab Spring” we witnessed the sudden collapse of authoritarian regimes that appeared at least as stable and enduring as the Putin regime.

The complexity of the task that Putin and his narrow selectorate that benefits from the current regime will have to deal with is also defined by Russia’s transitional position in the ranks of the above-mentioned post-Soviet political systems. Unlike other consolidated authoritarian regimes, Russia has gained some experience in political competition during its first post-Soviet decade. Furthermore, in our opinion, this period was not just the after-effect of the shock caused by the collapse of the old (Soviet) system that took the form of a temporary and forced liberalization, but was also brought on by structural factors: 1) a high share of urban and educated population and, consequently, a more developed civic culture and a more Westernized social structure; and 2) a higher diversity level of the Russian economy and, by extension, of Russian elites. It is worth reminding that over the long term (from 1991 to 2016) the share of resource rent in the country’s GDP amounted to about 13 percent.

The above-described models of non-democratic transfer of power in post-Soviet countries outline three basic scenarios available to Vladimir Putin. First of all, he can amend the Constitution by eliminating term limits and get elected president of Russia yet again, like the leaders of other countries with consolidated authoritarian regimes. Second, he can return to the “successor” scenario that he already tested from 2008 to 2012 (the administrative-electoral model). And third,

he can alter the power structure in such a way that he would be able to remain the one making decisions or even a full-fledged head of state without being the president elected by popular vote (the institutional model). A scenario under which Putin would become head of a new state is an additional possibility worth mentioning.

It is important to understand that some scenarios require a lot of preparation as well as amendments to the country’s legislation and even its Constitution. Thus, it is not to be supposed that the solution to the “2024 problem” will not be sought until 2024. Some scenarios might have already been launched or will be shortly. Meanwhile, the launch of a specific scenario does not necessarily mean that it will be carried out.

The “Fifth Term” Scenario and Crisis Mobilization

To begin with, there is an essential fork in the road: will Putin be holding an elective office after 2024 or not? Our review led to a stunning conclusion that despite the corrupt and at times fictitious nature of electoral procedures in most post-Soviet countries, the direct popular vote is the most reliable mechanism of ensuring government legitimacy, including in consolidated authoritarian regimes where at first glance elections seem meaningless. In reality, they are very important although their functions are entirely different from the ones they have in democracies.

In general, as has already been mentioned, individually, both formal and informal institutions are not sufficient to provide actual power and legitimacy under such regimes. The former ones help concentrate informal power that remains flawed and vulnerable without formal legitimization procedures. This phenomenon of “communicating vessels” of formal and informal institutions is largely responsible for the internal dynamics of such regimes. The leader, who is the head the patronal pyramid and has been legitimized through appropriate procedures, enjoys the maximum authority possible.¹³

Beside formal legitimacy, regularly held elections in which the incumbent receives from 75 to 95 percent of the vote demonstrate the regime’s organizational potential to the public, elites, and other would-be enemies (for instance, external players), that is its capability to block threats, secure the loyalty of the elites, prevent the consolidation of opposition forces, and deliberately restrict citizens’ rights, including by stealing their votes with impunity. At the same time, while being aware of the use of unjust electoral procedures and election fraud to provide such high results, citizens still believe that the regime enjoys sufficient—though officially exaggerated—support. Thus, elections serve as a vivid representation of the regime—a demonstration of its invincibility.¹⁴ And finally, as has been repeatedly mentioned in literature, elections are the best guarantee against inter-elite threats, i.e., plots and take-overs.

In this sense, the optimal choice for Vladimir Putin is undoubtedly the scenario that was carried out in other personalistic regimes: the abolishment of term limits which opens the door to reelection. Technically, this scenario can be carried out easily. Russia is the only country out of seven post-Soviet autocracies that has not used this option. However back in 2008, when this was a pressing matter, Russia was still a competitive authoritarian regime, that is, a regime with much

13 On the significance of procedural legitimization in authoritarian regimes see for example von Soest, Christian, and Julia Grauvogel. “Identity, procedures and performance: how authoritarian regimes legitimize their rule.” *Contemporary Politics* 23.3 (2017): 287-305

14 On this subject see, for instance, Beatriz Magaloni. *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico*. Vol. 296. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 и др.

fewer opportunities for a personalistic dictatorship. The degree of authoritarian control in today's Russia is still not as high as in Central Asian countries where leaders regularly receive more than 90 percent of the vote. However, Putin's result in the 2018 election falls into the same range as the results of Kyrgyzstan's President Akayev (72 percent) and Belarus' President Lukashenko (77 percent) at the beginning of those terms during which they eliminated presidential term limits (Lukashenko did this by referendum, and Akayev did so de facto).

On the other hand, fear of an endless rule constitutes an important mobilizing factor both for the population and the elites. It was effective during the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and in Armenia in 2018; this factor played a somewhat visible role in Russia in 2012. The most significant boundary for Putin, however, is the fact that by having respected the constitutional ban on more than two consecutive terms in his previous tenure, he demonstrated the importance of this principle thus making everyone believe that he would be respecting it in the future. The reasons behind Putin's decision are not entirely clear. It is possible that at the time of his nomination he promised to Boris Yeltsin that he would leave office at the end of two terms (it is however unclear what could have been offered as guarantee to back such a promise). Whatever the reason, Putin is now prisoner of his own decision made in 2008, a time when such a step would have looked more natural than now given the favorable economic situation, more solid support of the population, and his less "worn-out" leader image.

It does not mean, however, that this scenario is obsolete. Nor do Vladimir Putin's hints that he has no intention to follow this course.¹⁵ In any case, such a decision, if made, should appear to be a "reluctant consent." However, such a consent requires strong arguments. Meanwhile, in the last ten years the Russian economy has been demonstrating extremely low growth rates, and no one expects it to reach the pre-crisis rate of 7 percent a year. This is why today, unlike what could have been the case in 2008, Russia's "successes" under Putin could hardly motivate the extension of his office. The "reluctant consent" scenario looks most realistic when combined with the crisis scenario. In case of a serious external or domestic crisis, Putin's consent to deviate from statutory adherence to constitutional limits would appear legitimate in the eyes of voters if the deepening of the crisis seemed a bigger evil than the deviation from constitutional requirements and previously made promises.

Meanwhile there are certain obstacles preventing the repeat of the scenario of the foreign-policy-based mobilization à la 2014 and 2015. Public opinion shows clear signs of tiredness of "geopolitical confrontation" and foreign policy issues. At the same time, such a mobilization is quite imaginable if the public believes the foreign-policy crisis to be caused by "aggression" toward Russia, and not the Kremlin's expansionist ambitions.

It is useful to recall that the mechanism of crisis mobilization accompanied by the "rally 'round the flag" effect played a crucial role in both Putin's coming to power in 2001 and his "rebirth" as a leader in 2014 after his return to the Kremlin. Three wars—the 2001 Chechen war, the 2008 Georgian war, and the 2014-2015 "Ukrainian" war—sew together Putin's rule thus creating a mobilization framework of the Putin regime and Putin's popularity. These conflicts not only support the nation's patriotic spirit but also remind the public of the great importance of security agendas and law-enforcement elites in government management and goal-setting. Another armed conflict around 2021 would fit quite logically in this series of wars.

¹⁵ See his answer to the question of a Bloomberg reporter at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, May 24, 2018 (...)

The “Successor” Dilemma and the “Tandem” Experience

The above-described cases of the “successor” scenario help develop the succession dilemma in personalistic authoritarian regimes. The power of an authoritarian leader—head of the patronal pyramid—emerges as a result of him granting to different actors and elite groups the right to use administrative authority and manage material resources for their own profit. The continuous system of guarantees and endorsements constitutes the power of the leader/patron. The “succession” scenario implies that the successor acknowledges and reaffirms the deals made by the previous ruler who granted certain rights to different actors. This, however, makes these actors relatively independent from the new patron. The unity of the patronal pyramid is thus challenged.

The power of the new leader (“successor”) emerges as a result of him canceling and renewing previous agreements in his own name. Meanwhile, as we have seen in the context of the transfer of power from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between secured (or irreversible) deals and unsecured ones. The question of this distinction itself becomes a political issue. The strengthening of the new leader’s position is in direct proportion to the strengthening of his own clientele that gradually overshadows and pushes aside the clientele of the previous leader. This was the logic of the Yukos case, which politically resulted not only in the transfer of oil assets to a new clientele but also in Putin’s pulling out from under the umbrella of the Yeltsin “Family” and the readjustment of the existing system of guarantees and agreements. In the aftermath of the Yukos case even those whose property rights were much better protected than those of Khodorkovski, who had never been part of Yeltsin’s close circle and family, found themselves in a fundamentally new situation and began losing power as the influence of the new “close circle” continued to grow.

The events developed in a similar way in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan where, having inherited the personalistic system of government, the new leaders dramatically altered its key elements, took charge of the old system of agreements, and largely redesigned it. This is also partly relevant to the case of Azerbaijan, although the “hereditary model” of the transfer of power usually implies a heritage consensus of a certain circle of families and clans that receive guarantees in return for their support for the “successor.”¹⁶

In the Russian “tandem” scenario, that is the temporary transfer of presidential power from Putin to Medvedev from 2008 to 2012, the switchover did not happen, because the new leader could not review the deals made by the previous ruler, who was still holding the veto power. Despite this, the experience of the “tandem” has demonstrated that a new clientele—a sort of “rival court” that creates a potential for the transformation of the single-patron pyramid into a system of competing pyramids—begins to form around the new leader, even a deficient one who does not possess the arsenal of informal powers. The process of the polarization of elites became, at least in Putin’s eyes, the driving force behind the 2011 and 2012 mass protests.

Consequently, based on his own experience of handling the Yeltsin legacy and dealing with the period from 2008 to 2012, Putin must have come to believe the “successor” scenario to be extremely unreliable. Another obstacle to the repeat of the “tandem” scenario is that the chance of Putin’s return to the presidential post in 2030 at the age of 78 seems extremely low. This means that the elites will align themselves with the “successor” because they will see the old patron as a “lame duck” whose real authority will be gradually decreasing with every year as the new

16 On this example of the transfer of power in Syria see Stacher J. Reinterpreting authoritarian power: Syria’s hereditary succession //The Middle East Journal. – 2011. – T. 65. # 2. P. 197-212.

leader's clientele will expand and strengthen.

However, as mentioned before, the “tandem” scenario includes elements of the institutional model of non-democratic transfer of power. In this sense, it has a lot in common with the Kyrgyz scenario of 2017 and the ongoing transfer of power in Kazakhstan. In 2008, Putin became prime minister and leader of the United Russia party. At the same time, the party's authority somewhat expanded. For instance, a rule was introduced—though not enshrined in law—that it was the United Russia party that proposed gubernatorial candidates to the president, who at the time appointed regional governors. Thus, this essential power to exercise control over regional patronage networks was also equipped with the “dual key” system. Apparently, Medvedev's authority with regard to the mostly Putin-oriented security and law-enforcement block was also reduced. This became evident when on May 12, 2008, right after Medvedev's inauguration, Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's closest colleague from the KGB and the FSB, was appointed secretary of the Security Council.¹⁷ His arrival marked the beginning of the process aimed at expanding the functions and increasing the political role of this body (in 2010, the federal law “On security” was adopted, and in 2011, the Statute on the Security Council that increased its power and the scope of its responsibility).

Like in the case of the transfer of power in Kazakhstan, this was an evident attempt at splitting the functions of the elected “president/patron” through the use of the institutions of “prime minister,” “ruling party,” and security council. During Medvedev's tenure this split was not yet enshrined in law which made it possible for Putin to go back to the old system of undivided authority after his return to the Kremlin. However, in the 2024 scenario such a redistribution of authority might acquire a tougher or even constitutional nature.

Institutional Model and Non-Electoral Legitimacy

Assumptions are constantly made that after 2024 Putin will hold some non-elective post with broader powers which would allow him to remain a de facto head of state or to control the decision-making process. The most commonly heard is the hypothesis about Putin's future role as prime minister, with both himself and the parliament enjoying broader powers. However, the analysis of non-democratic transfers of power in the post-Soviet space and trends of institutional mutations in modern authoritarian regimes suggests that the probability of such a scenario is not particularly high.

Comparative political science holds party authoritarian systems to be generally more enduring than personalistic ones.¹⁸ For instance, they are better at solving the problem of succession (the example of China of the last four decades proves this point). In this respect the transformation of the Russian personalistic regime into a parliamentary one with a dominant (ruling) party and a dictatorial prime minister would make sense. However, the model of party authoritarianisms in today's world is not efficient. Most single-party regimes that are functioning consistently (14 out of 15) were formed back in the Cold War years. According to the GWF database, in 1989, the share of party regimes among non-democratic systems amounted to 37 percent, and in 2010, to 25 percent while the share of personalistic regimes increased from 23 to 45 percent.

¹⁷ In 1998 Patrushev replaced Putin as chief of the Control Directorate of the Presidential Administration; in 1999 he became Putin's deputy in the FSB and later replaced him as head of the FSB, the post that he held until 2008. From 2001 to 2008, the post of secretary of the Security Council had been held by “retirees,” i.e., representatives of the late Yeltsin bureaucratic elite who gave way to Putin's appointees. This defined the Council's peripheral role in the government system before the arrival of Patrushev.

¹⁸ Geddes, Wright, Frantz 2014.

In other words, today, party regimes look like a relic of the past while the personalistic model of a “strong leader” is rather popular and efficient (and thus likely to be reproduced). Even China, the model of a successful party regime, demonstrates signs of evolution toward the personalistic system. Party regimes were formed primarily during the era of ideologies and social utopias, in the aftermath of revolutions and liberation civil wars, whereas in the last 40 years the problematics of “national development” have been mainly focused on mercantilist policies with the goal of improving material well-being and encouraging economic growth.

The repeated failed attempts at maintaining power by transitioning toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential system in the post-Soviet space can be explained by the weakness of party systems and “ruling parties” that had formed here in the context of a dominating executive branch. Unlike party regimes that formed in the 20th century, these “ruling parties” do not rule, but in fact constitute the clientele of the executive branch. As a result, they enjoy a very low degree of public legitimacy.

This applies to Russia to the full extent. As opinion polls demonstrate, Russians exhibit low levels of trust toward political parties as institutions on the one hand and high levels of trust toward the “strong leader” model on the other. The data in *Table 4* clearly show a deep gap in the level of trust in executive and representative institutions and the marginal position of parties in the Russian political universe. These data undoubtedly reflect the image of hierarchy of public institutions that has formed in the public mind and is being to a certain degree cultivated by the regime. Time and serious effort will be needed to change this image.

Table 4. Index of Trust in Government Bodies and Public Institutions in Russia, 2012-2018

PRESIDENT	77.9
ARMY	69.2
CHURCH	60.9
STATE SECURITY AGENCIES	60.8
GOVERNMENT	53.9
MEDIA	51.9
STATE DUMA	50.8
REGIONAL GOVERNMENT BODIES	49.3
LOCAL GOVERNMENT BODIES	46.8
COURTS	45.5
POLITICAL PARTIES	37.7

Data: annual surveys by the Levada Center (<https://www.levada.ru>); shown is the average trust index from 2012 to 2018, calculations by the author.

Although “ruling” or dominant parties in post-Soviet countries do play a significant role in the system of authoritarian control and procedural legitimization of the regime, they don’t so much “rule” as accumulate the “negative vibes” associated with the regime. It is their inability to demonstrate a convincing dominance during the elections that every so often leads to mass protests and revolutions. In the 2010s, Russia’s “ruling party” (United Russia) has struggled to receive more than 50



Vladimir Putin, 2016 / UNIAN

percent of the vote in nationwide elections. In 2011, it received 49 percent of the vote thanks to wide-scale fraud, and the election results led to mass protests the scale of which Moscow had not seen since the 1990s. In 2016, the party received 54 percent of the vote, a modest result considering the ongoing authoritarian consolidation and the post-Crimean “rally ‘round the flag” effect. In regional elections, United Russia’s average result does not exceed 45 percent of the vote. In fact, today, Russia’s “ruling party” is the regime’s Achilles heel rather than its pillar of support (cf. the popular “party of crooks and thieves” label launched by Aleksei Navalny). This is an extremely unreliable basis for legitimacy for a dictatorial prime minister elected by the parliamentary, or party, majority. Thus, we believe the scenario of a transition toward the mixed parliamentary-presidential system in 2024 to be unlikely and least desirable from the Kremlin’s point of view.

The same goes for the assumptions that after 2024 Putin will be heading a collegial body similar to the State Council, comprised of the country’s top officials. These assumptions are based on the underestimation of the role of “procedural legitimacy” even in profoundly authoritarian regimes. The State Council is either a junta based on a widespread use of violence or just a government similar to that of China that has to be approved by a representative body. Thus, the chairman of the State Council is either a prime minister in a parliamentary republic or a president elected by a nationwide representative body (like the president of the People’s Republic of China). Their legitimacy is based on the legitimacy of the party rule.

It is worth mentioning that expanding the authority of the parliament and electing the head of the executive branch by the parliamentary majority looks like a fairly appealing idea to the elites. Indeed, it sounds like a promise of a more reliable representation in the executive coalition and of curtailment of the personalistic leader’s willfulness. It is not a coincidence that not only some political bureaucrats in Russia but also Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko have recently begun talking about transferring some powers to the parliament.¹⁹ Coming from him, it sounds like an attempt at consolidating the Belarusian society—both the

19 RIA Novosti, April 19, 2019: “Lukashenko Declared the Necessity to Amend the Constitution of Belarus” (https://ria.ru/20190419/1552845038.html?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop)

population and the elites—in the context of growing tensions in the country’s relations with Russia, and at offering the elites a long-term and balanced scenario of the development of the sovereign Belarusian statehood. Elements of a “democratic” scenario envisaging the strengthening of the role of the parliament and the liberalization of access to elections can also be used in Russia in case of a deteriorating social situation characterized by a decline in economic dynamics and a sharp increase in protest activity. It must be borne in mind though that there are as of yet no examples of such a model functioning properly in the post-Soviet space.

More aligned with the nature of the evolution of modern authoritarian systems and the essence of the Russian regime would be an attempt at dividing the presidential power between the elected president and the “security council,” a body that is associated with basic values of modern autocracies (“sovereignty” and a broad understanding of security) and represents the institutional embodiment of the actual power vested in the “siloviki” in post-Soviet authoritarian regimes. As mentioned, this scenario is being carried out in Kazakhstan and would in fact suit Vladimir Putin ideologically. The secretary (or chairman) of the Security Council not only controls the security and law-enforcement vertical but also enjoys a certain doctrinal legitimacy provided that he possesses an adequate political weight and informal instruments. In this capacity he appears as the president’s associate who relies on extra-electoral legitimacy, rather than as his subordinate. This position would be quite acceptable for Putin in the future.

Yet Vladimir Putin does not enjoy the same degree of personal legitimacy as Nursultan Nazarbayev. He cannot claim to be the founder of the Russian state and the country’s “first president” even if such a status is attributed to him by propaganda. This is why in order to carry out the Security Council scenario, this body, currently an independent department of the presidential administration, will have to see its status readjusted and procedures of legitimization of its head will have to be developed. As in Kazakhstan, the Council’s functions will be expanded: it will be positioned as a body that is responsible for drafting proposals for the president on topical issues of domestic, foreign, and personnel policies. The candidate for the post of the Council’s secretary or chairman will be approved by the State Duma or the Senate. Moreover, in both the “tandem” scenario and the Kazakh one, beside the security vertical, the “dual key” system also encompasses the position of prime minister (through the party majority in the parliament) and the mechanism of gubernatorial “appointments.” The logic behind this is not even that it is too risky to entrust the elected president with such powers but that there should be a single decision-making center which would reduce the risk of fragmentation of the executive coalition into several autonomous clienteles.

Although technically this structure looks compelling, it is rather unreliable both symbolically and in the long run. It is pertinent to recall that the last period of “dual leadership” (tandem) was characterized by a serious decline in public trust in government institutions and a drop in Putin’s poll standings. It is possible that this was partly caused by the erosion of the symbolic function of leadership, the de-personalization of political power. While Medvedev looked like a pretend tsar, Putin appeared to be an inadequate one.

The lack of legitimacy common for any non-elective position under the elected president can be compensated for by the informal weight of the political figure and his non-institutional legitimacy. The positions of “patriarch for life” held by Deng Xiaoping in China or Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore were modern examples of triumphant endings of political careers and can be regarded as icons of successful authoritarianism. In some measure, Nursultan Nazarbayev aspires to repeat this experience. However, it is worth paying attention to the formal and informal basis of this status. First of all, as mentioned, it is the role of the “founder” of the polity and statehood (Lee Kuan Yew, Nazarbayev). Second, it is the existence of a developed and operational party that “approves” the incumbent leader of the

executive branch (Deng Xiaoping, Lee Kuan Yew). And finally, it is the unfolding of an “economic miracle.” The average annual growth rate of China’s economy under Deng Xiaoping amounted to 10 percent; in the 30 years of Lee Kuan Yew’s rule in Singapore it amounted to 8.5 percent; and even under Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan it has reached 6.6 percent annually over the last 20 years. The annual growth rate of Russia’s economy under Putin (3.7 percent from 2000 to 2018) has been only slightly higher than the worldwide average, which is obviously not enough to claim non-institutional legitimacy; however, the virtual stagnation of the last 10 years has gradually erased the successes of the first decade. Nor do the “return of Crimea” and the geopolitical confrontation provide a solid base for this: the importance of Crimea and foreign-policy agendas is decreasing in the public mind, giving way to frustration over the social and economic situation.

The combination of security policies and repressions against the elites, the confrontational nature of the country’s foreign policy, and 20 years of cumulative management capital will probably allow Putin to maintain control over the situation in the context of this scenario (as head of the Security Council with expanded powers). However, deprived of positive agendas, this leadership will be eroding and will clearly be inadequate to provide a triumphant finale for his political career—and, consequently, for preserving the Putin regime in the future. This is why the search for positive agendas and a basis for non-constitutional legitimacy will be a topical challenge for the Kremlin in the near future.

The “New State” scenario: reinstatement of polity

The new phase in Russia’s relationship with Belarus began almost immediately after Putin’s return (yet again) to presidency in 2018. Already in June it became known that the Kremlin wanted Mikhail Babich, a manager with a law-enforcement background, who was also appointed as Special Presidential Representative for Expanding Trade and Economic Cooperation with Belarus, to become Russia’s new ambassador in Minsk. This appointment was seen in Minsk as the launch of the war of positions.²⁰ Soon enough it became known that there were tensions in Moscow’s relationship with Minsk regarding gas prices and compensation for Russia’s tax maneuver in the oil industry. (Subsidized prices on gas and oil combined with preferential access to Russian markets constitute the base of Belarus’ economic stability). Over the following months the relations between Moscow and Minsk have been gradually deteriorating. Alexander Lukashenko openly accused Moscow of threatening the Belarusian sovereignty, while Russian officials have been making it increasingly clear that in exchange for preferential trade arrangements and new credits Minsk was expected to comply with the 1999 integration agreements.²¹

In the late 1990s the topic of a union between Russia and Belarus was an important factor that contributed to the strengthening of Alexander Lukashenko’s position as Belarusian leader. In 1996 the Commonwealth of Belarus and Russia was founded; in 1997 it was transformed into the Union of Belarus and Russia; and in 1999 the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus was signed, along with an Action Program detailing the gradual integration of the two countries (in 2000 it was ratified by both parliaments). In reality, however, both sides suspended

20 In April of this year Minsk succeeded in having Babich recalled. However, in return it was probably forced to make certain concessions.

21 Vladimir Putin made vague hints in this regard on December 6, 2018. A more direct, ultimatum-like hint was made on December 11 by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak; and on December 13 Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expanded on this subject (see, for instance, “Alexander Lukashenko Spoke Between the Lines” *Kommersant* 15. 12. 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3833073>).

the implementation of the Program: thanks to the economic growth that began in both countries, the regimes did not need the theme of “restoring the Soviet Union” as a source of their legitimacy. The unexpected return to this theme 18 years later, right after the presidential election that was supposed to be Vladimir Putin’s last, and Moscow’s willingness to recur to the forceful solution of the problem (the appointment of Babich and financial blackmail) are simply too telling. Analysts began talking about integration with Belarus as one of the Kremlin’s options for solving the “2024 problem.” These rumors were confirmed by unidentified Kremlin sources.²²

In fact, this scenario looks plausible because a solution to the “2024 problem” is not the only or even the driving force behind it. The relationship between Lukashenko and Putin had never been warm and has become even more tense after the annexation of Crimea. Considering Putin—and especially the post-Crimea Putin—a threat, Lukashenko never recognized Russia’s annexation of Crimea, has maintained normal relations with Kyiv, and avoided involvement in Moscow’s confrontation with the West. Moreover, he did not allow the deployment of yet another Russian military base on Belarusian soil, and the theme of national sovereignty began playing an increasingly significant role in Belarusian propaganda. Meanwhile, in the context of its confrontation with Moscow the West sharply lowered the degree of its criticism of the Minsk regime: this criticism became obsolete when it became clear that Lukashenko was not the last dictator in Europe.

Meanwhile, for all intents and purposes Belarus remained Moscow’s only strategic partner and ally in the post-Soviet space, as well as the only buffer zone in the strategic western direction that the Kremlin believes to be of considerable military importance. Lukashenko, however, is seen as an unreliable and duplicitous partner, while Moscow’s loss of control over Belarus is seen as a critical and unacceptable failure. These are the geopolitical considerations and fears that turn the project of Belarus’ “compulsive integration” into the Kremlin’s strategic plan. The main objective is to ensure Minsk’s dependence on Moscow for an unspecified historical period, while the solution of the “2024 problem” can (or should) become its “spin-off.”

Naturally, Lukashenko views a union as an extremely undesirable scenario. However, the resources and the leverage the Kremlin has over him are too substantial. Besides, it should be kept in mind that the union is probably not an immediate objective, and might be carried out as a gradual long-term scenario. At this point, the main goal consists in gaining control over certain elements of Belarus’ sovereignty (such as borders, infrastructure, and bank of issue). The process of full-fledged gradual integration can be spread over 3 to 4 years so that by 2024 a new joint Constitution could be adopted, and government bodies of a new state could be formed. The top offices in the future union could be either elective (through a direct election of president and vice president) or mixed parliamentary-presidential (with a president and prime minister, or a state council and its chairman elected by the parliamentary assembly of union republics).

Attitudes of the two countries’ populations toward “unification” require further research. No reliable data are yet available on this subject. It is fair to assume that integration agendas that were so popular with both Russians and Belarusians in the late 1990s and early 2000s have largely become obsolete. According to poll results published by the state-affiliated VTsIOM agency in April 2019, 48 percent of Russian respondents oppose unification with Belarus; 18 percent support a full-fledged unification; and 17 percent think that Belarus should join Russia as a

22 See for example: Bloomberg. Putin’s Term Limit Stirs Fears of a Takeover in Belarus By Henry Meyer, Aliaksandr Kudrytski, and Ilya Arkhipov. April 24 2019 г. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-24/putin-s-succession-dilemma-has-closest-ally-fearing-a-bear-hug>)

regional subject. There is some evidence that in Belarus low-income citizens and pensioners are likely to support unification in the hope of improving their situation, whereas the wealthier and well-educated people and the elites increasingly oppose this idea. The problem also consists in the fact that the populations of both countries have diametrically opposite visions of a “positive” unification scenario: in Russia a positive scenario implies a merger, while in Belarus it is a union on equal terms. However, the coordinated propaganda for unification aimed at creating a positive image of gradual integration in the coming years is likely to improve public attitudes toward this scenario.

The integration scenario appears to be politically complicated and expensive. However, if, as the author believes, the Kremlin considers and positions it as a geopolitical stratagem, which is critical for ensuring long-term security, the allowable costs will sharply increase. Moreover, in case of a successful integration, the country’s population will increase by 8 million people, or with a radical scenario of the simultaneous annexation of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia—by 12 million. The country would acquire ten new regions (including six regions of Belarus). Counting Crimea and Sevastopol which were annexed earlier this would mean an additional 15 million people and 12 regions. In this case, Putin would be able to not only become the legitimate leader of a new state but claim the status of its founder, with the corresponding lifelong legitimacy. The fact that the new state would be facing an extremely challenging external environment (a “besieged fortress” situation) would have an enormous impact on its institutions, state ideology, and the configuration of the elites, which will result in the ultimate reinstatement of Russia’s polity (as compared to the one established in 1991).

In general, though, the integration scenario—in its softer version, without Ukrainian and Georgian territories—appears to provide much more reliable mechanisms for solving the “2024 problem” and correlates more closely with Putin’s ambitions and his vision of a more suitable ending for his career than becoming secretary of the Security Council and gradually losing his power amid economic stagnation and external pressure. Barring an economic miracle, this is the positive agenda that could provide Putin with the status of the “founding father” of a new state.

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CONCLUSION: CHOICE OF SCENARIO AND THE REGIME'S DYNAMICS

Among the scenarios analyzed above, the first (“the fifth term”) and the last (“the new state”) would allow Vladimir Putin to maintain electoral legitimacy and a status befitting his ambitions. For instance, these are the only realistic scenarios that would allow him to hold onto his role of a world leader on the same footing as other great world leaders and to retain a veto player on the world stage. This is the role that currently serves as a pillar of support of Putin’s informal legitimacy and symbolically reaffirms Russia’s status as a “great power,” which is associated in the public mind with Putin personally. The implementation of the first scenario appears particularly realistic under the conditions of a domestic- or foreign-policy crisis. The second scenario, on the other hand, provides Vladimir Putin with a triumphant ending of his career, allowing him to maintain his status as founder of a new post-post-Communist statehood. These scenarios appear as the optimal prospects for Putin and his close circle (close selectorate).

The more conservative and inert “successor” scenario that would not imply any significant changes to the Constitution has some major faults. Successors—unless they are his children—rarely live up to the “patron”’s expectations, and even more rarely to the expectations of the “close circle.” This scenario requires an intricate “second key” system, the division of presidential authority, greater authority for the “ruling party” and its leader, and the readjustment and strengthening of the position of the head of the Security Council (within the most likely sub-scenario). At the same time, this scenario creates the risks of a split within the executive coalition and the incompetence of the “successor” whose candidature will be chosen based on his or her manageability and loyalty. Moreover, it would deprive Putin of the role of a key player on the world stage and a frontline challenger to U.S. hegemony.

The least likely is the scenario that implies the abolition of direct presidential elections and the transfer to a mixed parliamentary-presidential system. This scheme can be implemented in the context of unfavorable (from the point of view of Putin’s circle) social dynamics and introduced to the public as the democratization scenario accompanied by promises of better access to elections. However, generally speaking, it looks forced and undesirable. This has to do with the fundamental weakness of “ruling parties” in post-Soviet polities, the extremely low degree of legitimacy of Russia’s ruling party in the eyes of the public, its lack of footing within the regional elites, and the particular nature of the current setup of Russian elites in general.

Unlike in Kazakhstan, where post-Soviet elites were forming solely under Nazarbayev, the formation of Russia’s modern elites has spanned two fundamentally different periods—the eras of Yeltsin and Putin. In the 2000s, the legitimacy of Putin’s rule relied largely on high economic growth rates and the population’s income growth. This popularity translated into a rapid expansion of his personal clientele which laid its hands on the resources and sources of rent and pushed aside the Yeltsin-era elites. The weakening of the above-mentioned factors in the 2010s, when the nation’s economic growth declined, threatened these achievements. This forced the Putin coalition to seek a new basis for legitimacy after Putin’s return to presidency in 2012. This was found in the confrontational nature of the country’s foreign policy and the rather radical anti-Western sentiments reinforced by the regime’s escalation of repressions against the elites and citizens. These dynamics have largely contributed to the formation of the current regime’s profile: its focus on self-sufficiency, centralization, security policies, and its militarist and anti-modernization overtones. This profile will continue to exercise a decisive influence on the choice of the scenario for the transfer of power and the solution of

the “2024 problem.”

Meanwhile, the country’s current economic dynamics remain weak while Russians’ real incomes continue to decline. This is causing a substantial drop in public support for the regime. The political agendas of urban agglomerations and the eternal Russian “longing for the West” that manifested themselves unexpectedly in 2011 and 2012 should not be dismissed altogether. These groups lost the political initiative in the context of the “Crimea mobilization” but they are likely to return to the forefront as soon as the conservative and patriotic comeback begins showing obvious signs of wear. Taken together, these factors do not allow us to consider the upcoming transition as a technical issue that the current regime will have no problems dealing with, and increase the likelihood of radical crisis scenarios for the transfer of power.



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