



Center  
for  
Current Policy

# LEAVE NOT STAY

Risks and fears of Russians about Putin's potential  
leave from presidency

The launch of constitutional reforms reinvigorated discussions of power transit scenarios and President Vladimir Putin's political future.

Although prevailing interpretations in the media claim that one way or another V. Putin will stay in power even after 2024, the head of state presumably implies he is not going to hold office forever and the amendments he has proposed are not aimed at expanding his current presidential term.

V. Putin remains the most popular Russian politician with no opponents capable of replacing or challenging him. He has won four presidential elections and one parliamentary election while leading United Russia's party list; three presidential campaigns out of four (2004, 2012 and 2018) and 2007 parliamentary campaign were won by a landslide.

According to political discourse and public opinion, V. Putin has become the symbol of domestic political stability and the System of power itself. The idea that V. Putin as the leader of modern Russia has no alternatives is often described as one of the essential conditions for normal functioning of "Putin's state".

V. Putin's potential leave from presidency and power in general gives relevance to the issue of public attitude to this event, i.e. the fears and risks for the future of the country and personal future, which Russians relate to the incumbent president's decision in case this decision actually is made.

Public surveys demonstrate more than a half of all focus groups' members believe that if V. Putin leaves, the situation in Russia will deteriorate, while less than three quarters of participants think V. Putin's leave will not affect the situation in Russia and only ten percent of respondents consider the situation will improve.

For better understanding of risks/fears Russian people have about V. Putin's possible leave from presidency and politics, the Center for Current Policy conducted a research based on four focus groups in Moscow, Perm, Volgograd and Irkutsk on January 29, 2020.

## MAIN RESEARCH RESULTS

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of focus groups is that ***risks/fears related to Putin's potential leave from presidency are actualized and clearly represented in Russian people's consciousness.***

Meanwhile these fears are aggravated by the assumption ***the incumbent president may leave not only his office but politics in general.***

Focus groups' participants share the opinion that changes caused by this event can have a negative and all-encompassing effect on every Russian citizen.

The research **divides risks/fears in three groups depending on their expression and mentioning rates** while surveying the focus groups. These groups are the most expressed risks/fears understood by the respondents as having the direst or most painful consequences, moderately expressed and peripheral (less expressed) risks/fears that were the least actualized during the research.

1. The **most expressed risks/fears** are *escalation of fight for power and redistribution of wealth, deterioration of Russia's global status, disruption of power succession, reduction of state's social responsibilities and cancelation of national projects.* These risks are evidently related both to domestic and foreign policy.
2. **Moderately expressed risks/fears** include *risks of escalating ethnic conflicts and separatist movements, in particular in the Caucasus, soaring corruption and a growing threat of hostile acts by foreign states, primarily the US.*
3. **Peripheral risks/fears** are about *significant deterioration of economic situation, decline of the Russian Army's defense capacity, damages to business caused by countersanctions' cancelation, oligarchs' return to power, civil conflict uprising and a war with NATO countries.*

People believe the following factors reduce or mitigate these risks/fears:

- the assumption that **the incumbent president is not planning to leave after the end of term in 2024 ("He will never leave")**;
- the idea that **even after leaving the office he will remain the central figure in the political system ("Just like during Medvedev's presidency, when Putin was actually in**

*charge", "He'll rule in the shadows", "He'll become the unofficial president of Russia", "He's not going away");*

- the opinion that **constitutional amendments would enable the incumbent president to remain in office** (*"He'll change the Constitution the way he'll stay in charge"*).

The research results indicate the Kremlin faces a serious political and psychopolitical issue. Putin's leave from power or his transition from presidency to a new position must be accompanied by a significant compensation for Russian society.

The Kremlin will have to shape the interpretation of governmental decisions that would enable people to accept changes in Putin's role in political system (or his self-imposed withdrawal from it) while maintaining trust to the System of power itself, its new actors and leaders, i.e. protect its legitimacy. This is not the matter of human resources and career promotion but of ideas and meanings.

## **MAIN RISKS OF V. PUTIN'S POTENTIAL LEAVE**

**The first risk involves escalation of fight for power between different political groups and redistribution of wealth.**

The focus groups' respondents point out several factors contributing to the high estimation of this risk:

- understanding of V. Putin's key role in maintaining stability in Russia (*"The whole country relies on this person", "Russia will fall into chaos", "Putin proved to be the stability guarantor: who knows what'll happen if he leaves"*);
- expectation that tensions between elites will escalate in case the incumbent president leaves office (*"The conflict between "Kremlin towers", different agencies"*);
- assumption that big companies will pursue their selfish interests throughout the transition period (*"It's clear ... they'll fight like dogs over a bone", "All officials will change, all the positions", "They will sell out Russia"*);
- presence of opposing movements and potential instability of the majority party after V. Putin's leave (*"Zyuganov, Zhirinovsky, Yavlinsky: it'll be a mess", "United Russia, the ruling party, will collapse and everyone will fight for a bigger piece of cake", "Squabbling will follow"*);
- negative historical background in the country (*"It's always been like this; our history has seen it many times"*).

- absence of a worthy successor (*"I can't see a successor, someone to become the president instead of Putin"*, *"No matter how good or bad he is I can't imagine someone taking his place"*).

Besides, the respondents expressed their concerns that foreign countries may have a negative influence on the new president (*"You can put your trust in someone who promises to follow your principles, make your ideas come true and so on. But who knows what's going to happen when this someone becomes the president? How can you be sure this person won't change his views, sell out to the USA for a billion dollars, a tropical island, something like this?"*).

### **The second risk is the reduction of state's social responsibilities/ cancelation of national projects.**

The focus groups' members noted V. Putin plays a decisive role in expanding social support incentives and underlined risks of default on social responsibilities by a new government (*"There's a chance they'll cancel the maternity capital"*, *"Payments for children aged 3-7 may get cancelled: they'll say it's not profitable so it's needless"*, *"Most social progress will be suspended because they're already developing slowly; it's the President who keeps them all in motion and without him everything'll come to an end"*, *"People's welfare will crumble"*).

There is also lack of certainty that a new president will agree to maintain current social policies (*Another person may fully disagree [with existing social programs]*. *New authorities will change the budget to cut expenses*", *They'll say they're not responsible for Putin's promises*", *If something goes wrong the government will say they have no money to spend*", *Everyone's afraid of this. If everything goes south in the government and economic situation gets worse, they'll raise taxes to get the money*").

### **The third risk is the deterioration of Russia's global status and even a threat of foreign policy failures.**

The respondents specifically emphasize the respect and authority V. Putin has on the global level and fear that a new head of state won't demonstrate similar personal qualities (*Putin is valued high all over the world, his opinions and decisions can't be ignored*", *If someone else gets the office, foreign governments may think "Well, we can control this one"*", *They'll smother us even harder*", *Putin is a man of authority. He symbolizes the country – and who knows what happens if he leaves? I think other countries think the same*").

Other risk factors involve potential foreign policy failures, in particular related to the Crimea and Post-Soviet countries (*"They may try to make us give Crimea back"* (*the respondents underline* "we won't give it back willingly – they'll have to start a war", *"They'll depose governments in Belarus and Kazakhstan and then it'll be our turn"*, *"NATO will get too close to our borders"*, *"They'll smother us even harder"*).

#### **The fourth risk is the disruption of power succession.**

A disruption of power succession is understood by the respondents as a refusal of a new president to follow Putin's political course (*"A new president may have a different agenda, he will start doing things his way and adopt the laws he seems fit"*, *"A new president will make everything different"*, *"Putin's course won't be followed"*). This risk is shared predominantly by the loyalists.

## **MODERATELY EXPRESSED RISKS/FEARS**

### **Risks of escalating ethnic conflicts and separatist movements.**

The focus groups' members believe such risks are present in the Caucasus and other ethnic republics. In particular the respondents emphasized that stability in the Caucasus regions depends on good personal relations between V. Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic (*"Putin and Kadyrov are on good terms, there's mutual understanding; Putin helped Kadyrov to renounce insurgency and restore the Chechen capital"*, *"There are personal agreements between Putin and Kadyrov"*, *"If a new person takes the office, new relations will have to be established"*) as well as on financial support from the federal budget (*"If we stop paying the tribute, this will upset the Northern Caucasus"*, *"If Putin leaves, the money'll stop going there and that's it"*).

In general people are evidently concerned that many ethnic tensions in Russia remain unresolved and may become escalated (*"Russia is a big country, with lots of unresolved conflicts, even if everything's looking good for now"*, *"Nationalist ideas remain strong in Chechnya"*, *"When Tatarstan was considering its independence, Yeltsin gave them all the resources and the oil to make them stay, but this separatist movement can rise again"*).

Other risks are related to growing influence of foreign countries international terrorist groups in the Caucasus (*"The global terrorism will take a closer look at Chechnya, a new government won't have enough power to stop them; or perhaps the US will try to grab hold of the region"*).

### **Soaring corruption**

The focus groups' participants listed such factors as attempts of interested parties to buy positions in the government (*"Everyone'll try to buy a job in the new government"*), lower control by the "siloviks" (securocrats) (*Putin seems to hold them [law enforcement and state security agencies] back*), *"Now he has enough strength to control this bloc, he used to be a part of it"*, *"Fewer corruption cases will be investigated"*), as well as rise to power of new elites focusing mostly on personal profits (*"The old officials were stealing, but if the government changes, the new ones will join them and start stealing as well"*, *[Corruption] will reach unbelievable levels*”).

### **Growing threat of hostile acts by foreign states, primarily the US.**

The focus groups stressed that one of V. Putin's top priorities is to protect the country on the international level, predominantly from the USA. (*"The only major upside of Putin's rule is that our country is protected from the threats that keep on coming from the US"*, *"Without Putin Russia*

*would've ceased to exist", "If Putin leaves the office, this will make the US actions bolder", "America is spending money to destabilize Russia", "The Ukrainian course of events might follow").*

There's fear that unpredictable actions will be made by the US that for now is deterred by Putin ("I'm afraid of Americans, I really am, their government is insane").

## PERIPHERAL RISKS

### **Significant deterioration of economic situation.**

Risk factors mentioned by the respondents include:

- Russia's economic dependency on foreign countries (*"Our country depends on other states a lot, any change in the authority will affect the market and the ruble... it'll be bad for the business and the people"*);
- possible economic stagnation during power struggle (*"Economy may fall down when they start fighting for power"*, *"While they fight over a bone, no one will take care of the economy"*).
- decline of Russia's role as an arms exporter (*"We produce all these weapons not just for our defense, we sell them and all the money we gain is invested in the economy. There's a possibility that when Putin leaves, the sales will fall down and the money won't come to the economy"*).

### **Reduction of Russian military capacity.**

The focus groups' members noted V. Putin is personally involved in strengthening national defense potential (*"Our military power will decline, I guess. Because he really helped the army to rise. Are we making tanks now? Yes? Jet fighters? Yes. Submarines? Yes. I think if he leaves, it all will collapse once again"*).

### **Other peripheral risks/fears mentioned:**

- damages to business caused by countersanctions' cancelation (*"The farmers will suffer"*);
- oligarchs' return to power (*"As soon as the businessmen see a smallest opportunity, they'll make a run for it. They'll start buying the new authorities"*, *"If some bunch of random guys will come to power, they'll be easy to manipulate"*, *"Those [oligarchs] who stayed here are laying low but some are in London now"*);
- civil conflict uprising (*"There'll be civil disturbance"*, *"There'll be riots"*);

- a war with NATO countries (*"Putin always opts for a peaceful solution. Any other person in his place would've started a war"*).