

War in Ukraine Has Sparked a New Race to Succeed Putin

The choice may be between a "new Putin" or an "anti-Putin."

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The war in Ukraine and ensuing sanctions have failed to cement Russia's power vertical or unify the country's influential business and political groups. Had President Vladimir Putin gotten the swift victory he was clearly counting on when he launched his "special operation," he would have solidified his position as ruler, but as the conflict drags on, the elites are being forced to think of their future and to try to find their place within it.

Putin himself demonstrates no intention to step down but looks increasingly relegated to the past. The elites and potential successors are watching his every military move, but they can already see that he has no place in their postwar vision of the future. His sole remaining function in their perception of the new era of peace will be to nominate a successor and leave the stage.

The war has, therefore, set in motion a public race of the successors. In recent years, political maneuvering in Russia was kept in the shadows, but in this new era, loud proclamations and high-visibility political gesturing are again the norm. It is as though an active election campaign is already under way, with bureaucrats and functionaries within the ruling party doing their best to get into the limelight and even attacking one another. Until recently, such behavior was almost unthinkable: the presidential administration worked in silence, while high-status functionaries at the ruling United Russia party restricted themselves to making promises on social policies.

Former president, ex-prime minister, and deputy chair of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev has been particularly busy making statements. His over-the-top, hardline comments on foreign policy issues and insults hurled at Western leaders often look comical, but the role he's trying to play is clear. It blends tough isolationism with populism, firmly placing the blame for internal woes on the shoulders of external enemies.

Another politician newly making loud gestures is the first deputy chief of staff and curator of the Kremlin's political bloc Sergei Kiriyenko, who has now been given responsibility for overseeing the breakaway republics in the Donbas. He has become one of the new era's highest profile politicians, though previously—ever since he became a presidential envoy in the early 2000s—he had never demonstrated any inclination for the limelight.

But now Kiriyenko has taken to wearing khaki and talking loudly of fascists, Nazis, and the unique mission of the Russian people. He headlines public events, and in the Donbas he unveiled a monument to “Granny Anya,” the elderly woman the Russians tried to turn into a symbol of the “liberation” of Ukraine. He is clearly emphasizing his status as curator of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk “people's republics” (DNR and LNR): something done by neither of his predecessors in that role, Vladislav Surkov and Dmitry Kozak.

Media reports have stressed that those taking up administrative jobs in the Donbas republics are alumni of the school for governors, Kiriyenko's brainchild. And though Kiriyenko isn't directly involved in the military campaign, he has clearly managed to carve out a niche for himself in Putin's martial agenda.

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The speaker of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, is another front-runner in the battle of the hawks. Since his transfer from the Kremlin (as first deputy chief of staff) to the State Duma, Volodin has stepped up his public profile, making numerous provocative statements that are guaranteed to be picked up as sound bites. Now he is redoubling his efforts, backing a ban on foreign words on shopfronts and calling for the death penalty to be kept in the DNR and LNR.

Other influential bureaucrats have adopted a very different strategy, choosing to steer as far away from the subject of the “special operation” as their position allows. That silence is in itself a political gesture.

Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, both regarded as contenders for Putin's succession prior to the war, have been notably tight-lipped about the

“special operation” in Ukraine. Sobyenin toed the line by appearing at a rally in support of it at Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium in March, and traveled to the LNR in June, but he has yet to be spotted in army fatigues or to call for Nazism to be crushed. Mishustin, meanwhile, has avoided the subject of the war entirely.

The rational explanation for their silence is that war is a temporary affair, and relations with the West and even with Ukraine will, at some point and somehow, have to be restored. When that time comes, those who haven’t insulted “hostile countries” or directly participated in the military campaign will be better placed to go about that.

Remaining silent has its own risks, however. If Putin eventually requires complete commitment from all bureaucrats on the Donbas and military issue, the fact that they remained silent could be held against them.

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This is all reminiscent of the situation in 2007, when Putin’s second term as president was coming to an end and he could not run for a third consecutive term under the constitution. There were two candidates for the role of successor: first deputy prime ministers Sergei Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev. Ivanov positioned himself as a conservative and authoritarian, while Medvedev played the role of a liberal modernizer oriented toward the West.

The winner, Medvedev—who claimed back then that “freedom is better than non-freedom”—genuinely strayed from Putin’s beaten track, drawing closer to the West. He spoke sincerely about continuing his presidential career, but quickly folded when Putin wanted to return to the presidency in 2012.

Following Putin’s reelection in 2018, the issue of succession again arose, only to be cut short when Putin changed the constitution to reset the clock on presidential terms, enabling him to run for two more terms from 2024. Now the Russian elite is again looking around for a successor, but in this new era of political gestures, it is the potential successors who have fired the starting pistol, rather than Putin.

The two strategies—loud gestures and resounding silence—reflect the different approaches and assumptions of those who use them. The hawks operate on the basis that the successor will be chosen by Putin, so they mimic his behavior in their attempts to win his favor, indicating that they will preserve his legacy loyally. “After Putin there will be Putin,” Volodin once said.

Those remaining silent are counting on a different succession scenario, whereby the new leader is selected by the elites. As a rule, in this scenario, bets aren’t placed on the most popular potential candidate: they’re not backing anyone who likes to get up on the podium and flex. Instead, technocrats who are capable of taking into account the interests of various groups will become the leading candidates. A “new Putin” could start a redistribution of influence and property, and the elites have little interest in that.

The 2022 version of the successors’ race is a virtual event, of course. Putin hasn’t announced the start of casting and clearly isn’t planning to leave his job: the presidential administration

is preparing for elections in 2024, and it goes without saying who will be in the central role. The war and potential annexation of further territories will remove the need for Putin to come up with a manifesto of any kind. He wants to go into the election as the man who defeated Nazism (irrespective of the actual results of the invasion) and as a historic figure who doesn't need to make any promises to his people.

Nevertheless, the interest shown in the succession race by the most senior members of the elites—not to mention the enthusiasm of its participants—demonstrates that the system wants to discuss (and see) a post-Putin future. It might seem that the extreme circumstances of wartime should banish any thoughts of what will come later. But whatever that future looks like, there appears to be less and less room in it for Putin.

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