

Re-Election, Reshuffle and Warring Elites: Putin's Key Challenges in 2023

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January 10, 2023



Moskva News Agency

More than 10 months on from the invasion of Ukraine, the contrast between the scale of the external shocks faced by Russia and the relative inertia inside the country is striking. Despite military failings and punishing sanctions, most Russians have gone on with their lives as though nothing is happening, while the elites have tried not to think about what tomorrow may bring, instead putting their full trust in Putin.

However, 2023 could prove a dramatic year for Russia and be make-or-break for its leadership's resistance to change, with three internal questions promising to shape the country's development for decades to come.

First, Putin will have to decide whether to run for re-election in 2024. Russia's constitution was amended in 2020 to allow him to remain president until 2036. He may alternatively name a successor, though to leave enough time for campaigning, he would have to do so by the end

of December 2023.

For now, no one is sure what his plans are. This is by design, as Putin prefers to keep his elites in the dark. Indeed, in the summer of 2020, he justified the constitutional changes that made it possible to extend his rule as a guard against unrest among the elites, who he said “need to work, not look around for successors.”

Following the revision of the constitution, both the presidential administration and elites operated on the assumption that Putin would hold on to power indefinitely. Today, the key question is how his calculations have been changed by the war and, in particular, the fact that it has not gone according to plan.

Some believe that in unleashing grave problems and threats, the war has strengthened Putin’s resolve to stay in power beyond 2024. Given his contempt for “political deserters” — those who quit their posts in tough times — he is unlikely to become one of them.

Others feel that not only is Putin open to giving up power, he may see doing so as part of a solution to the conflict with Ukraine. Even if that appears to be wishful thinking, part of the elite clearly hopes that such a reset will suffice to end Russia’s recent string of setbacks.

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However, both sides lack certainty about his designs. In any case, Putin is famously fond of making decisions at the eleventh hour, often based on situational factors and in defiance of popular expectations.

The 2024 problem, then, has become a major source of anxiety for the elites. It will do more than any other issue to influence the events of 2023, as the political class tries to work out Putin’s intentions and plan around them with an eye to minimizing risk.

A second, related issue is the growing schism between those in the elites who favor escalating the war, and those who warn against doing so. This divide emerged after Russia’s withdrawal from the Kharkiv region and its relinquishing of the key city of Kherson, and was fueled by Ukraine’s strike on the Crimean Bridge, the referendums held on annexing occupied parts of Ukraine, and the authorities’ subsequent ambiguity on what Russia’s official borders are.

The pragmatists, who consist of technocrats as well as mid-ranking officials in the military and the security services, are united in their conviction that the war should be paused and rethought, and that the country should opt for a more realistic policy in keeping with its rather limited capacities. The hawks call for Russia to not only unleash its full military might against Ukraine but also to radically restructure its own political and economic system. The latter plank makes theirs a revolutionary faction (albeit pro-Putin, for now at least) whose aim is to supplant a government they see as stalled.

Their struggle for supremacy is set to be one of 2023’s key political fights, and one that hinges largely on events on the battlefield: the worse Russia performs militarily, the more vicious the pragmatists’ battle with the hawks. The Kremlin will find its preferred mechanism for

suppressing dissent — repression — ill-fitting if used against the regime's loyalists.

The hawks will take the offensive, targeting the military top brass and politicians, as Yevgeny Prigozhin, the notorious head of the Wagner group, already has. The pragmatists, meanwhile, will express doom and gloom about the direction of the conflict, seeking to scale back Moscow's war goals and force recognition that victory is impossible. Their message will be well received by non-military elites, who were taken by surprise by the invasion and fear its medium-term consequences.

All this leaves Russia stuck between military madness and careful consideration of a possible de-escalation, and Putin faced with a choice: between doubling down on his quixotic pursuit of Kyiv's decisive defeat and returning to the negotiating table, with the West if not Ukraine.

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The third key issue Russia faces in 2023 revolves around government personnel changes, which are highly likely, even if it is hard to predict who will replace whom.

One reason a reshuffle is near-certain is the increasing demand at the top for dynamism and effectiveness. Putin's inclination to invite technocrats into the government may grow further, with senior figures in the Cabinet, the presidential administration, and the power structures all aged and exhausted by the war and military failings forcing Putin to look for new ideas. Another is the coming presidential contest, given the historical record: reshuffles have preceded all but one of Russia's presidential elections.

A long buildup of tension within the government offers another reason to expect personnel changes. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov are being blamed for corruption within the armed forces, while the FSB has been slammed for intelligence failures. Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev is seen as having lost the plot altogether, and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin as too apolitical, while central bank governor Elvira Nabiullina is suspected of secretly opposing the war.

The government's senior figures are all dissatisfied with each other: a mutual dislike that gives Putin cause to switch things up. Still, his conservatism and apprehensiveness when it comes to firing underlings will likely lead him to try to strike a balance between stability and renewal.

These fateful developments will be profoundly influenced by events on the battlefield. If, as Kyiv has predicted, Russia attempts a large-scale offensive in February or March, it will likely be met with significant Ukrainian resistance. Otherwise, Moscow will continue slowly strangling Ukraine with attacks on its infrastructure, to which Kyiv will respond with diversionary attacks on Russian soil.

Russian political life will remain in the grip of the war's grim and oppressive atmosphere, leaving elites even more anxious and fearful of the future. Putin's hypersecrecy and refusal to explain himself to anyone will do nothing to help the situation. Repression will undoubtedly grow, with all dissent criminalized, elements of a state ideology introduced, and new pretexts found for even longer prison sentences.

In 2023, Russia's already historic war with Ukraine will show its full transformational potential, finally changing Russia from within and straining its leaders' ability to keep the situation under control and plan the decisions they make.

This article was originally [published](#) by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/10/re-election-reshuffle-and-warring-elites-putins-key-challenges-in-2023-a79897>