

# The “Leader for Life” Governance Model

by Christopher Walker

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New York University

President Vladimir Putin's political gymnastics to prolong his hold on power in Russia were not wholly unexpected. The Russian president, who is constitutionally barred from seeking a third term in office, has now made it clear that he intends to assert a preeminent role for himself in that country's politics after his presidential term concludes in March 2008. The precise shape and form of his new role is not yet entirely clear, but one school of thought suggests that he will look to secure the prime minister's post as a political "bridge" back to the presidency. While Putin publicly states that he is determined to stay true to the Russian constitution, his gambit makes clear that he is taking a fine reading of the document, observing its letter rather than its spirit. His move has validated the fears of skeptics who supposed that Russia's authoritarian leader would, one way or another, find a pathway to retain his grip on power.

The recent signals that Putin will not give up the reins of power bode poorly for Russia's ability to democratize and normalize its politics. His decision to "serve the people of Russia" after his term ends also edges the country closer to a particular typology of governance: the "leader for life" model.

The leader for life governance model exhibits a number of distinct features; among them a wholesale intolerance for opposition or critical voices, including independent civil society and news media. The very notion that one person should remain in a dominant position of power indefinitely means de facto that any opposition voices must be relegated to the sidelines.

Kremlin adherents argue that an ongoing role for Putin is critical for the country's stability. Paradoxically, this argument implies that the system would suffer from instability without Putin to impose order on it.

The byproducts of this zero-sum politics that accompany the leader for life model are manifold. The absence of political competition among a range of diverse political forces has an impact on the shape of economic development. The dominant powers in such systems bring under their sway the commanding heights of the economy. In Russia's case, the lucrative energy sector has been the object of control for a small governing group. For this to succeed the model requires a leadership personality that is deemed indispensable to governing the country.

Placing all societal chips on a particular personality has the pernicious effect of retarding sorely needed institutional development. This degradation of institutions is such systems' Achilles heel, especially as it relates to combating corruption. Despite Putin's ambition to create a "dictatorship of law" and the Kremlin's placing of anti-corruption initiatives at the top of its agenda, not surprisingly the scourge of corruption in Russia has only grown in recent years. INDEM, a policy institute in Moscow, estimates that bribery and graft in Russia is now at the level of some \$300 billion per year. Russia, like other countries in the leader for life category, will be hard pressed to make a meaningful dent in

the widespread and entrenched corruption that plagues the system, absent the indispensable institutions that are needed to tamp down graft and official misconduct.

The leader for life model is not confined to the Russian Federation or, for that matter, the other states of the non-Baltic former Soviet Union, although in this region there is a “hard core” of such systems.

A glimpse across the globe reveals that this phenomenon of unchecked power is resilient and present in a number of strategically important, and even pivotal, states. Examples of this model, or its near cousins, including modern-day dynastic succession, are most frequently seen in the regional arc of lands that runs from Eurasia through the Middle East and across North-Central Africa where political freedom is so poorly established. This geographical swath features countries that are categorized as “Not Free” in Freedom House’s annual survey of political rights and civil liberties, “Freedom in the World.” This essay represents a brief survey of the countries that are taking a leadership role in establishing the leader for life model.

### **The Former Soviet Union**

In the non-Baltic former Soviet Union a debilitating feature of governing systems has been the absence of reliable and democratic succession mechanisms. Since 1991, few presidents in post-Soviet countries have left office voluntarily. Presidential succession in these countries has revolved around extension of terms by incumbents through flawed referenda, or by greasing the succession wheels through controlled successor selection.

Incumbents in the region, from Belarus to Azerbaijan to Uzbekistan, have used the advantages of state administrative resources to tilt the political playing field and deny a rotation of power outside of the elite circle of their families and political associates. This, in turn, has led to a brutal winner takes all environment that extinguishes a diverse and competitive range of voices from politics.

Incumbents have sidestepped successor selection by simply extending their own terms in office through the use of referenda to amend constitutionally established terms. Such referenda have been held in no fewer than a half dozen cases in the region. Below is an illustrative although not exhaustive review of the methods used by leaders throughout the former Soviet Union to remove ceilings to their terms in office.

- In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov has prevailed in three flawed elections and extended his term in office through a similarly flawed referendum. According to the country’s constitution, the president is permitted to serve only two seven-year terms. Karimov, who assumed power as first secretary of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989, was elected president of independent Uzbekistan in 1992. In 1995, Karimov extended his presidential term until 2000. He was

reelected in 2000 for another five-year term, but prolonged his term to seven years through a national referendum in January 2002. The referendum allowed Karimov to remain in power until early 2007. With presidential elections scheduled for December 23, 2007, Karimov, who has ruled Uzbekistan for 18 years, has no intention of surrendering power. So while technically Karimov is ineligible to run based on Uzbekistan's constitution, he is on track to secure for himself another term based on the logic that his third term in office is actually his second, on the assumption that he got to start all over again at the 2000 election.

- In Belarus, President Aleksandr Lukashenka, engineered a vote in October 2004 that removed term limits, enabling him to run in the future without limits. Lukashenka went on to receive 83 percent of the vote in April 2006 in elections that the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights deemed neither free nor fair. With restraints no longer in place, Lukashenka has signaled his intention to run again in 2011.
- In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbaev extended his term by a referendum in 1995. Nazarbaev, who has ruled the country since 1990, announced his intention to seek another term in 2006, just as legal proceedings in the "Kazakhgate" scandal began in U.S. Federal court in New York City in 2004. This criminal investigation involves alleged kickbacks to top Kazakh officials as part of oil deals between the Kazakh government and western oil majors. On August 18, 2007, President Nazarbayev's party won nearly 90 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections that in the process swept from the country's legislature any remaining opposition forces. Constitutional reforms in 2007 exempted from term limits President Nazarbayev, who is now in an unfettered position to serve as "leader for life."
- In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rakhmonov in 2003 pushed through a referendum that has opened the door for him to remain in power through 2020.
- In Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev held power from the time of the country's independence in 1991. In 2005, in the face of burgeoning corruption allegations swirling around the president and his family, Akaev was pushed from the political scene in 2005 in what came to be known as the "Tulip Revolution." In the months leading up to Kyrgyzstan's March 2005 parliamentary elections, which triggered the mass protests against the Akaev government, there was hope that President Akaev would abide by his own pledge to step down in October 2005 at the end of his constitutionally circumscribed term. In the immediate aftermath of the March parliamentary elections, rumors abounded that the president would use the election results – the opposition won just 6 out of 75 seats – to modify the

constitution and extend his term.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, with parties disposed toward President Akayev capturing more than 51 of 75 seats in that flawed election, the door was opened for the parliament to rewrite the constitution to enable the president to run for his office again (under constitutional provisions, the president was restricted to two consecutive terms in office).

Vladimir Putin himself came to power through a guided handover. Boris Yeltsin resigned from office in 1999 six months before the end of his term in order to ensure that Putin, his handpicked successor, would be elected. As part of this handover, Putin signed a decree assuring Yeltsin and his family immunity from prosecution for redistribution of property and violence against Parliament that took place during Yeltsin's watch.

Since Putin ascended to the presidency in 2000, a defining feature of his governance has been an ever tighter concentration of power in the Kremlin. This suffocating approach has systematically marginalized key societal actors - including news media, the business community, and civil society - all of which play an indispensable "checks and balances" role in keeping the authorities honest. Rather than increasing his ability to govern, however, President Putin's anti-democratic initiatives have undercut the very institutions that are indispensable if Russia is to improve the quality of its public policy decision-making.

As with other leaders in the region, Putin and his associates have been particularly adept in denying political opponents of any stripes meaningful political space in which to operate. In June of 2005, for instance, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov indicated that he might run for president in 2008. Within weeks, prosecutors began looking into allegations that, while in office, Kasyanov had bought a home from the state for less than 2 percent of its market value. The investigation has effectively derailed a Kasyanov candidacy. In May of 2005, a Moscow court sentenced the billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky to nine years in prison after he was convicted of fraud and tax evasion. The state took action soon after Khodorkovsky had become actively engaged in politics in opposition to Putin. These measures of preemption of potential opponents are standard operating procedure under the leader for life model.

### ***Dynastic Succession?***

A particular sub-group of the leader for life model is that of "dynastic succession." In Kyrgyzstan, the heavy handed effort by President Akaev in the lead up to that country's 2005 elections to ensure his daughter, son and wife's two sisters would hold seats in the new parliament contributed to public outrage at the regime's brazen attempt to formalize the Akaev family's role in the country's political life. Following Akaev's ouster, the

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<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyz President Solidifies His Control of Parliament: Akayev had pledged to abide by term limits and step down this year, but with fresh legislative support, he may decide to amend the rules, David Holley, The Los Angeles Times, March 15, 2005, accessed at: [www.latimes.com](http://www.latimes.com).

protection of his family members' election to the parliament, where they would enjoy immunity, was one of the conditions the former President asserted as part of the deal to cement his formal resignation from the presidency. The Tulip revolution short circuited the possibility of President Akaev installing one of his offspring into the presidency.

The elite transfer of power has also been taken a step further, suggesting a possible trend of dynastic succession. In Azerbaijan, former President Heidar Aliev secured the election of his son, Ilham, in order to carry on his legacy once the aging president proved too ill to rule himself. Passing power to a close relative naturally ensures that no outsiders will be able to take hold of the valuable assets accumulated while the leader was in power. Rumors abound that similar family handoffs could be engineered in other countries, including Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, the leader for life model is also on display beyond the former Soviet Union's hard core. In Syria, where one-family rule has been institutionalized, the dynastic model is on display. In Egypt, as well as Libya, there are prospects of power being handed from one generation to the next within "presidential families."

In countries as diverse as Venezuela and Zimbabwe the unchecked power of the leader for life model is also in full view. President Robert Mugabe has dragged Zimbabwe into an economic, political and social morass of epic proportions (a country where hyperinflation recently has reached 7,900%). Mugabe has been in power for 20 years and no rotation of power is in view. Past elections have been overwhelmingly tilted in favor of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which controls every daily newspaper, all broadcasting outlets, the military, the police force and the electoral infrastructure. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez managed to ram through a measure that in August 2007 added one year to his current six-year presidential term and eliminated the two-term limit, allowing him to run for reelection indefinitely. Chavez has indicated he would like to remain Venezuela's leader for life.

The absence of any meaningful checks on dominant power in these countries has resulted in settings where corruption flourishes. This review of the countries in which the leader for life model is taking hold reveals that these systems are regarded as among the most corrupt in the world (according to Transparency International data), and the trajectory of corruption is upward.

In profoundly corrupt settings, leaders cling to power for as long as they are able and are reluctant to leave office at legally mandated deadlines for fear of prosecution by their successors. Corrupt political leadership has gone to extraordinary lengths to bend the rules in the effort to retain power. The reassertion of the leader for life model has rekindled a system of governance that looked to be laid to rest with the passing of Latin American strongmen of a generation ago and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their

reemergence poses a stiff challenge for those who had hoped for sounder governance to take root and the more positive political outcomes that come with it.

*Christopher Walker is director of studies at Freedom House*