

## **After Putin, the Flood? Succession and Authoritarian Continuity in Russia**

In an interview with David Letterman, when asked whether the war in Ukraine would continue in case of Vladimir Putin's death, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's categorical answer was no. According to Zelenskyy, with Putin gone, the autocratic institutions of Russia would come to a halt.<sup>1</sup> With constant rumors regarding Putin's health or an imminent palace coup abound, many share the hope that Putin's demise would spell an end to war and autocracy. Still, some fear this exact scenario. As one article theatrically vexed, evoking the Bourbon kings of France: "Après Putin, le déluge?" After Putin, the flood? Or, in other words, would his demise be that of the Russian state too?<sup>2</sup> If examples from similar regimes in the region have taught us anything, then the autocratic nature of the Russian regime—and with it, the war—would endure. Based on those examples, what can then be said about how the transition and its immediate aftermath would look like in Russia? Additionally, with its position as regional hegemon, how would the transition affect Russia's role in the region? The answer to this last question will have an acute bearing on the republics of the South Caucasus, where Russia's influence—welcomed or not—is keenly felt.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, much hope was pinned on the democratic future of the many former Soviet republics who suddenly found themselves faced with independence. However, few lived up to the democratic expectations hoisted upon them, instead developing into personalistic autocracies. In the Eurasian context, these regimes have most often been characterized by a president invested with both strong formal and informal powers, based on widespread patron-client relationships at the intersection of the state and the economy.<sup>3</sup> To the unacquainted observer, these presidents often seem both omnipresent and omnipotent. They have, seemingly, total control over their domains and engage in long-running, elaborate stratagems, unknown to everyone but them. Yet, there is one fate no president—nay, man—can ever control nor escape: Death. There must, inevitably, be a transition of presidential power. However, due to the personalized power-sharing structures inherent in these types of regimes, there is no guarantee of a smooth transition. This tends to create a propensity for uncertainty among the regime elite, which in turn increases the risk of defection and—in the worst case—

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<sup>1</sup> David Letterman, "My Next Guest with Volodymyr Zelenskyy," YouTube Video, December 26, 2022, Netflix, 26:50 to 27:35, <https://youtu.be/liooTXAF5Xo>.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Taub, "The very scary reality behind the silly rumors of Putin's death," *Vox*, March 12, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/12/8205193/putin-death-rumors>.

<sup>3</sup> Henry E. Hale, "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *World Politics* 58, no. 1 (2005): 137-138, 144; Henry E. Hale, "Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin," *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 31; Marlene Laruelle, Marlene, "Discussing Neopatrimonialism and Patronal Presidentialism in the Central Asian Context," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 4 (2012): 310–11.

regime change. Arguably obsessed with their political survival and historic legacy, this is *the* nightmare dilemma of most autocrats: who will succeed them, will the transition be successful, or will their regime crumble in the process?<sup>4</sup> This, then, begs the question of how the autocratic presidents of Eurasia dealt with this monumental challenge of succession. Especially, since most often—if not every time—they successfully navigated these treacherous waters of succession, no large-scale or long-term negative effect on the character or durability of their regimes was seen. In their success, three types of succession have been observed: dynastic succession, planned succession and sudden death. Due to the striking similarities between the many personalistic autocracies of Eurasia, how these regimes handled their questions of succession, and their subsequent trajectories, can help shed light on the future dynamics of succession in Russia.

### **Dynastic succession**

Dynastic succession has always been popular among autocrats: what better way of assuring regime continuity than by keeping it in the family? This has been no less true for the autocrats of Eurasia, where it has been considered by many and even successfully implemented by some. The most recent dynastic succession took place in Turkmenistan just last year, when the country's second president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, handed over the reins of presidential power to his son, Serdar, who had until then held several government positions.<sup>5</sup> Another example of dynastic succession was observed in Azerbaijan two decades ago. When the long-serving president Heydar Aliyev became fatally ill in 2003, his son Ilham Aliyev, who had been long groomed for power, was elevated to succeed his father. Quickly being promoted to prime minister, then to the ruling party's presidential candidate, Ilham handedly won the subsequent elections, two months before his father's death. Heydar clinged to life just long enough to secure a smooth transition for his son, ensuring elite support for the transition, while the rapid-fire succession left little chance for any opposition to rally against this hereditary handover of power.<sup>6</sup> Dynastic succession is, however, an unlikely scenario for Russia. Putin,

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<sup>4</sup> Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 84; Hale, "Regime Cycles," 138–140.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Putz, "Turkmenistan Set for Dynastic Succession: Early Election March 12, President's Son Running," *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/turkmenistan-set-for-dynastic-succession-early-election-march-12-presidents-son-running/>; "Turkmenistan leader's son wins presidential election," *Al Jazeera*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/15/turkmenistan-leaders-son-wins-presidential-election>.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Radnitz, "Oil in the family: managing presidential succession in Azerbaijan," *Democratization* 19, no. 1 (2012): 63, 65-67.

first of all, has no sons but two daughters, Maria Vorontsova and Katerina Tikhonova. Being a rare occurrence among autocratic regimes in general, there have been no examples of female dynastic succession among Eurasian regimes. Ilham Aliyev's older sister was, for example, never considered a potential presidential successor. There were some indications that Gulnara Karimova, the eldest daughter of Uzbekistan's first president Islam Karimov, who played an important, if somewhat peculiar, role in the politics of Uzbekistan, was being prepared for an eventual succession. While Karimova's short-lived musical career, which included an unforgettable duet with Gérard Depardieu, should arguably have been an automatic disqualifier, it was her forceful and unaccountable manner which, in the end, attracted the ire of the elite and, eventually, her father, who had her stripped of all business assets and put under house arrest.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the daughters of Putin were never set up to succeed him. Putin's personal life has generally been a zealously guarded secret, with his family life—and with it, his daughters—largely shielded from the public. They have never been included in their fathers governmental dealings and have never held significant government posts, which would be indicative of them being groomed for positions of power. Unless something drastically changes, dynastic succession seems a highly unlikely scenario in Russia.

### **Planned succession**

The next possibility then would be a planned succession which does not involve familiar ties but political ones. This is how Kazakhstan's only presidential succession played out when, in 2019, one of the longest-ruling non-royal leaders in the world, Nursultan Nazarbayev, handed over power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. There had been some speculations about the possibility of a dynastic succession taking place, with one of Nazarbayev's three daughters (or their husbands) succeeding him, but this never panned out. Instead, Nazarbayev's choice fell on Tokayev, a career politician and long-term member of his patron-client network. When Nazarbayev abruptly announced his resignation, Tokayev, as the speaker of the Senate, became interim president, giving him the advantage of campaigning for the subsequent snap elections as acting president. No major opposition to the succession was encountered, with Nazarbayev remaining in the wings to ensure internal elite compliance, while the repressive apparatus of the state ensured

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<sup>7</sup> Rico Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization and Problems of Post-Charisma Succession in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan," *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 65-66; Thomas Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: Regime Survival after Nazarbayev and Karimov," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2015): 60–61; Alexey Malashenko, *Exploring Uzbekistan's Potential Political Transition* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014), 5-8; RealGoogoosha, "Nebo Molchit," YouTube Video, January 5, 2013, [https://youtu.be/jjB4LZS\\_rFE](https://youtu.be/jjB4LZS_rFE).

compliance from society at large.<sup>8</sup> This succession bore similarities to the transition of power between Russia's first post-independence president, Boris Yeltsin, and his chosen successor, Putin. Like Tokayev, Putin was a career politician and a member of Yeltsin's patron-client network. Appointed prime minister earlier that year, Putin became acting president when Yeltsin—due to his declining popularity and health—announced his resignation on New Year's Eve in 1999. Already popular due to his law-and-order image and with little time for the opposition to organize, Putin handily won the subsequent snap elections. Yet, due to the constitutional changes Yeltsin had (quite literally) forced through in the early 90s, the ambitious Putin was handed an extremely strong and centralized presidential system on a silver platter. Whether Yeltsin planned to remain in the Kremlin as an *éminence grise*, is not known. Yet, leaving aside hypothetical grand schemes, Yeltsin was successful in securing for himself and his family assurances of immunity, seemingly claiming nothing else—an absolute steal of a bargain Putin had no qualms about honoring. Nazarbayev, however, was a totally different case. He wanted and planned on staying on as an informal ruler. In order to achieve this and to avoid handing over a powerful set of reins—and with it, his fate—to his successor, Nazarbayev stripped the presidency of its power and in turn strengthened institutions still under his continued control. Most crucial was his role as *Elbasy*, or Leader of the Nation, which gave him legal immunity, but also the right to chair the Security Council for life. This gave him complete control over the security apparatus, as the council's decisions were subject to mandatory execution by state bodies and officials, including the president. When Tokayev then came to power, he found himself in a significantly weakened presidency, while Nazarbayev remained in control over a series of significantly strengthened governmental bodies.<sup>9</sup> However, even with decades of planning and preparation, Nazarbayev would eventually find himself sidelined. Following the unprecedented 2022 Kazakh unrest, Tokayev assumed the chairmanship of the Security Council, relieving Nazarbayev of the privilege, while simultaneously dismissing—even arresting—powerful allies of his now seemingly former patron.<sup>10</sup> However, and to their assumed

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<sup>8</sup> Kirill Rogov, *A New Prince: non-democratic transfer of power in the post-soviet space* (Washington, D.C.: Free Russia Foundation, 2019), 24; Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession," 57; Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization," 67; Nurseit Niyazbekov, Nurseit, "Democracy, the Tokayev Way," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2020, [thediplomat.com/2020/03/democracy-the-tokayev-way/](https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/democracy-the-tokayev-way/).

<sup>9</sup> Zhenis Kembayev, "Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan: A Move towards Democratic Transition?," *Review of Central and East European Law* 42, no. 4 (2017): 319-20; Rogov, "A New Prince," 25.

<sup>10</sup> Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan explainer: Who's in, who's out as Tokayev tries to take back control?," *Eurasianet*, January 6, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-explainer-whos-in-whos-out-as-tokayev-tries-to-take-back-control/>; Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Ex-security services chief and Nazarbayev ally arrested," January 8, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-ex-security-services-chief-and-nazarbayev-ally-arrested/>.

relief, while both ended up politically sidelined, neither Yeltsin nor Nazarbayev suffered the fate shared by roughly 70% of their former colleagues: exile, imprisonment, or death.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, their political demise points to a danger inherent in naming a successor: will they remain loyal? With the ultimate price so tantalizingly close, why should the successor wait for the old man to die when he instead can hurry the process along? Anointing a successor invariably bestows a certain level of power and influence upon them, especially if the appointment comes with an official position. The successor can use this power to rally equally impatient or disgruntled elites to their self-promoting ambitions. Nazarbayev tried to avoid this scenario by limiting the power handed to his successor, albeit unsuccessfully. Putin, too, seemed to be making similar preparations, with the constitutional changes introduced in 2020 closely echoing those of Nazarbayev. While parts of Putin's initial reform proposals intended to disinvest powers from the presidency, in turn empowering the State Duma and the prime minister, these proposals did not make the final cut. This seeming aboutface notwithstanding, with the strengthening and constitutional enshrinement of the hitherto informal State Council, and with the firm restriction of the presidency to two terms, any presidential successor would still find themselves in uncomfortably small shoes, as compared to the big boots currently worn by Putin.<sup>12</sup> While these constitutional changes could be said to indicate the preparation of some sort of planned succession in Russia, the fate of Nazarbayev cannot have escaped Putin. Tokayev was perhaps forced to wait for a more opportune moment to turn on his patron, which came in the form of the 2021 protests, but even with decades of planning, Nazarbayev found himself like Yeltsin: alive, but largely irrelevant. An additional headache for securing a successful transition is that elite support must, too, be ensured. As the elite cannot be sure that agreements made by the predecessor will be honored by the successor, they might become tempted to rebel. Uncertainty about the continued access to power and wealth can make even the most erstwhile allies into adversaries. At worst, unruly elites might start coordinating around an alternative successor to secure their positions of power—and elite infighting is truly the stuff of revolutions.<sup>13</sup>

While speculating about Putin's potential successors is clearly a favorite pastime of most Western media, what is not clear is if this is a relevant debate to even have in the first place. The next presidential elections in Russia are scheduled in less than a year from now. While the

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2014): 321.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Teague, "Russia's Constitutional Reforms of 2020", *Russian Politics* 5, 3 (2020): 312, 316-321.

<sup>13</sup> Hale, "Regime Cycles," 139-142; Hale, *Patronal Politics*, 84.

nomination of a successor can happen without much warning—as was seen with Putin himself—to increase the chances of success, time should be given to build the successor’s political legitimacy and for the transition to be properly managed. Additionally, as the war in Ukraine rages on, and the consequences of it accumulate, a transition would be fraught with additional challenges. It therefore seems likely that Putin has postponed the process indefinitely, due to fears induced by the numerous complications inherent in naming a successor. If Putin were to resign tomorrow, the current Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin would become acting president. While Mishustin might be many things, a successor he is not. There still is, of course, time for Putin to reshuffle his government and give the post to his intended successor, but the nearer it gets to election time, the more difficult the transition becomes. Any way you look at it, there is no clear inheritor to Putin, as the never-ending debate regarding potential successors hints at. Even if a successor was found, they would be in a weakened presidency and with Putin still very much at the helm of the regime. Furthermore, Russia’s aforementioned constitutional changes cleared the way for Putin to run for president in 2024 and again in 2030, if he so wishes. With no apparent successor present, it looks increasingly likely that this is what he will do. Putin is, however, no longer a sprightly young man. He just turned 70 years of age and speculations about his health are rife. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic he allegedly hid away in his dacha outside Moscow, fearful of being infected. His meetings held at the end of battleship-sized conference tables—again, supposedly due to the fear of infection—have become the stuff of memes. Yet, death waits for no man. If Putin does not properly prepare for his own unavoidable mortal demise, it will inevitably lead straight to the last type of succession.

### **Sudden death**

Twice have Eurasian autocrats neglected the issue of their own mortality, leaving the continuity of their regimes hanging in the balance. Uzbekistan’s first president, Islam Karimov, had, as mentioned, flirted with dynastic succession but was put off by his daughter’s eccentric behavior. With the familiar path out of the picture, preparations for a planned succession were laid but Karimov died in office in 2016, before they could come to fruition. With Uzbekistan’s elite involving diverse and powerful groupings, the lack of a successor had every potential for infighting. Instead, after several days of internal deliberation, the prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was chosen as Karimov’s successor. A similar scenario was seen in Turkmenistan, when its first president, Saparmyrat Nyýazow, died in 2006, with neither an appointed successor nor hereditary heir ready in the wings. Again, there was no real contest among the elite, as might have been expected in such an uncertain situation. Instead, the innermost elite quickly

designated a successor from among their own, namely the minister of health and Nyýazow's personal doctor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who had a generally favorable relationship with his elite counterparts. While Mirziyoyev's succession followed formal procedures, Berdimuhamedow was installed ignoring most rules and regulations.<sup>14</sup>

In both cases, the successor was a compromise candidate, who was seen as able to avoid instability during the transition, preserve the political status quo and maintain elite stability. This elite consolidation likely took place as no one was interested in disrupting the balance of informal structures in either regime. This elite predisposition towards the preservation of the *status quo ante mortem* should come as no surprise, as the political elite in autocratic regimes is motivated on the whole by a desire to retain and increase their power. While it might be tempting to assert power over rival elites, the risk to the continuity of the regime is exponentially higher during transition periods than at any other time. Any elite infighting at this point risks collapsing the entire regime. It is, therefore, in the interest of everyone involved to choose a compromise successor and fight over the spoils at a later time—if they so desire. As for the exact choice of candidates, Berdimuhamedow was not necessarily the most powerful and well-connected member of the elite and was, as such, perhaps seen as a president who indeed could be easily controlled. He might even have fostered this image during the succession period, so as to gain support for his candidacy. In the case of Mirziyoyev, while a powerful actor, he was still reliant on other elite groupings giving their explicit approval and consent for his candidacy, since no one group held complete dominance.<sup>15</sup>

However, elites who entertained thoughts of Berdimuhamedow being a potential puppet president were quickly proven wrong. With the extensive powers vested in him as president, Berdimuhamedow made short work of all threats to his fledgling regime. The key instigators behind his rise were quickly removed from power, establishing him as the undisputed president of Turkmenistan.<sup>16</sup> For Mirziyoyev, as he had stronger elites to overcome, it was a more slow and deliberate process, albeit with the same result. Having dismissed several of Karimov's old guard, co-opted others and replaced the rest with loyalists, by the first anniversary of his ascent

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<sup>14</sup> Slavomír Horák, "Leadership Succession in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: Between Stability and Instability," *Central Asian Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2018): 6-9; Horák, "The Elite in Post-Soviet and Post-Niyazow Turkmenistan: Does Political Culture Form a Leader?," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 4 (2012): 377-79; Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization," 63, 69; Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession," 54.

<sup>15</sup> Hale, "Regime Cycles," 137; Horák, "Leadership Succession," 7, 9; Horák, "The Elite," 378; Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization," 63.

<sup>16</sup> Abel Polese, Donnacha Ó Beacháin, and Slavomír Horák, "Strategies of Legitimation in Central Asia: Regime Durability in Turkmenistan," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 4 (2017): 437; Horák, "The Elite," 378.

to power, Mirziyoyev had successfully cemented his rule over Uzbekistan.<sup>17</sup> Both these examples illustrate a danger for elites inherent in choosing the successor: they, too, like the president in a planned succession, cannot be guaranteed that the successor will not turn on them as soon as they have gained the legitimacy and power to do so. After all, if you are powerful enough to appoint a president, you are potentially powerful enough to depose one. Once fully invested with all the formal and informal powers inherent in their newfound position, the new president has every incentive to turn against any and all perceived rivals.

### **A Russian succession**

That being said, what, then, is the most likely scenario of succession in Russia? For planned successions formal procedures tend to be involved: The incumbent appoints the successor to the position next in line to the presidency, resigns and allows the machinery of transition to do what it has been designed to do. It seems no such procedures have taken place in Russia, perhaps due to the fact that there is no clear successor, not enough time until the next elections and the state being in too precarious of a situation due to the war in Ukraine. While this might change by the 2030 elections, with the war still raging, Putin has every reason to wait for Russia to find itself in calmer waters before contemplating the issue of succession. That being said, there might be an even simpler explanation for this apparent lack of preparation for a planned succession: Putin's potential inclination to stay in power indefinitely.

As for the fabled palace coup, this is a highly unlikely scenario, based upon the same rationale which drives elite consolidation during succession crises, namely the risk the *coup d'état* poses to regime continuity. It is of course impossible to completely rule out a *coup d'état*. Yet, in heavily consolidated autocracies such as Putin's regime in Russia, as long as access to domestic sources of wealth is guaranteed—which is the bread and butter of autocratic patron networks—elites tend to gravitate towards the security of the familiar status quo.<sup>18</sup> Russia's battlefield setbacks have, too, been cited as having the potential of provoking a *coup d'état*. This, however, would not necessarily push any elites over the edge, either. Iraq, for example, had two major wars end in *status quo ante bella*—and with significant economic and societal damage to boot—without it having major effects on the composition of its regime.

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<sup>17</sup> Ambrosio, "Leadership Succession," 59; Catherine Putz, "Uzbekistan Dismisses Long-Serving and Much-Feared Security Service Chief," *The Diplomat*, February 1, 2018, [thediplomat.com/2018/02/uzbekistan-dismisses-long-serving-and-much-feared-security-service-chief/](https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/uzbekistan-dismisses-long-serving-and-much-feared-security-service-chief/)

<sup>18</sup> Daniela Donno, "Elections and Democratization in Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2013): 707.



While elite infighting might seem like a more common occurrence at the moment, this is the war bringing already existing internal tensions to the surface, as marginalized elites try to use the opportunity to squirm themselves into the halls of power. Yevgeny Prigozhin, of Wagner fame, is a good example of this, as he tries to succeed where the regular Russian army failed, all in a bid to enhance his own standing within Putin's patron-client network.<sup>19</sup> The appearance of heightened tensions within the regime can be further explained by the increased attention paid to its inner workings, in the pursuit to understand what is happening in the ever murkier halls of the Kremlin. This harks back to the Kremlinology of the Cold War era, where the tiniest tidbits of information were used to analyze the mechanics of the Soviet Union's secretive regime, with often vague and inconclusive, if not outright wrong, results. Elite infighting and palace coups make for good headlines, but are often based on pure speculation, if not works of fiction.

As Putin seems to have no immediate plans of leaving, and if none of his clients are prepared to remove him, it then leaves sudden death as the likeliest scenario of presidential power transition. What would this scenario entail for the authoritarian continuity of the current regime in Russia? While Mishustin would become acting president in the event of Putin's death, until new elections were held, the probable outcome would be that of the regime elite—guided by a sense of self-preservation—consolidating around either a compromise candidate seen as a pliable puppet, as was the case with Berdimuhamedow, or a *primus inter pares*, who would be dependent on the support of his counterparts, as was the case with Mirziyoyev. Barring the off chance of him being the elite's chosen man, Mishustin would likely find himself replaced by the elites' genuine chosen successor, in order to bestow them with additional legitimacy in the run up to the elections. Doing this might ignore formal procedures, but that is of little importance in these types of regimes. Marginalized elites would find themselves uninvolved in the process (sorry not sorry, Prigozhin). So would the general public, as it is only when something goes awry that they can really hope to play a decisive role in the transition.

Significantly, common to all the scenarios of succession outlined in this article, based on previous examples from the region, the autocratic nature of the Russian regime is almost guaranteed to endure. It is only in instances where there have been multiple competing elite networks—unable or unwilling to consolidate—or where the consolidation of regime elites was never successful, that regimes are liable to see any form of significant democratization. As

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Tanks, the New Patriotic War and the Strelkov-Prigozhin Spat," In Moscow's Shadows (podcast), January 29, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1026985/12139218-in-moscow-s-shadows-89-tanks-the-new-patriotic-war-and-the-strelkov-prigozhin-spat>.

mentioned previously, in heavily consolidated autocracies, elites have every incentive and capacity to compromise and outsiders—whether disgruntled elites, the general public or foreign powers—have no realistic ability to mount a challenge to autocratic regime continuity. Any infighting over the spoils of the state usually takes place at a later time, as the new leader consolidates their hold over the regime, sometimes at the cost of the elites who chose him. Lastly, at the risk of disappointing Zelenskyy, the end of Putin would not automatically guarantee an end to the war in Ukraine. While they tend to be rather bellicose by nature, not all autocratic regimes are equally warlike. As such, it is understandable—and even permissible—to hope that Putin’s personal demise, while not necessarily harboring the end of autocracy in Russia, might at least have the potential of spelling an end to the war in Ukraine. The war is, by all accounts, closely linked to Putin’s personality. If the fortunes of war continue to disfavor Russia, and the war’s international and domestic consequences continue to multiply, a major consideration for the elite in a succession scenario would likely be whether to continue the war or not. With the perception that this is Putin’s personal war already prevalent, the death of its main antagonist might make ending the war through a negotiated settlement a more realistic prospect. The successor (whoever he is), and his elite supporters may of course decide to continue the war, but might also see it as an opportune moment to end it. An added incentive for the new ruler and his cronies would be the potential lifting of international sanctions, which could follow an agreement to end the war. However, with the elite already intimately tied to the war, and with the illegally annexed regions of Ukraine in turn intimately tied to Russia, any successor will likely find it a difficult task to untangle themselves and their newly-fledged regime from the war. Any action taken to cede part of the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as any calls for such actions, was made explicitly illegal by the aforementioned constitutional reforms. This includes not only Crimea, but the four recently annexed regions, too. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the successor would not be made of the same wool as Putin himself. Putin has after all surrounded himself with men who, on the whole, share his world view and might, too, see the war in Ukraine as justified and necessary, if not fundamental for the continued survival of Russia. It is from these men that the successor, and his supporters, would, by all accounts, emanate. If, against all odds, the new regime would be open to a negotiated settlement of the war, they would likely meet fierce domestic resistance. The successor, as all newbies in a presidency, will start off with a deficit in political legitimacy. That alone will make it harder for them to deal with the inevitable diehards within the regime elite (especially from the power ministries) who, along with Russia’s homegrown far-right extremists—now heavily armed and battle-hardened from fighting in Ukraine—will be unlikely to accept anything perceived as a

retreat from even the most minimal war goals. Having paid a heavy price in both blood and brothers-in-arms, and already complaining about the lack of zealotry in the way in which the war is being pursued, peace without ultimate victory would, for them, be a hard sell.

Wars—and their consequences—are notoriously hard to predict. The potential consequences the war in Ukraine would have on a presidential succession in Russia are even more so. Yet, Zelenskyy, while understandably hopeful in his prediction of an end to autocracy and war, should lower his expectations for peace and democracy. Even with Putin gone, the autocratic nature of Russia is likely to endure—and the war in Ukraine will be unlikely to come to a quick and painless end.

### **Caucasian repercussions**

What repercussions this will have in the Caucasus will, too, depend on how the exact succession plays out. A successful planned succession will most likely change little in terms of Russian policy and posture in the region, as the regime is likely to maintain its fundamental character. Putin would still be lurking in the shadows, making sure his legacy, too, is maintained. In other words, a planned succession is very unlikely to rock the boat in terms of authoritarian regime continuity and domestic and foreign policy. Sudden death, on the other hand, might have more far-reaching consequences, depending on its execution and outcome. In simple terms, if the transition is botched, then all bets are off. It would be pointless, if not simply impossible, to even try to predict the outcome. No one could have predicted Ukraine's Maidan revolution and its profound and far-reaching consequences before it happened. What a similar scenario in Russia would look like is beyond imaginable. However, if in a sudden death scenario the elite was successful in consolidating, it would lead to the same outcome in terms of foreign policy as with a successful planned succession. In summation, regime continuity is the most likely outcome in any succession scenario, as previous instances of succession in Eurasia have shown. This would entail a continuity of Russia's foreign policy too. For the elite surrounding Putin are not unlike him. Quite to the contrary, they very much share and are shaped by the same regressive worldview: From the very end of the Soviet Union to the first days of Russia reborn, the imperialist legacy has lived on through them. Only a significant strategic defeat and, crucially, a proper reckoning with Russia's imperial past and present—and the impact it has on its neighbors—can ever have a chance of changing this. In this, Putin is merely a symptom and not the cause. His demise would sadly yet surely not be the demise of Russia's imperialist tendencies.