16 MORE YEARS - THE STORY OF PUTIN, THE NEW TSAR OF RUSSIA

Dhruv Chandra

Vladimir Putin will be president for life. A public referendum to reform the constitution of Russia, held from the 25 th of June to the 1 st of July this year, extended the term limits of the Russian President–allowing Putin to remain in power for two more 6-year terms, if re-elected (and well, taking into consideration the accidental deaths of his political opponents, re-election doesn’t sound all that difficult for Putin). But no matter how simple the previous sentence may sound, its repercussions are grave: The ex-KGB officer is about to become the longest serving Russian Head of State since authoritarian dictator Joseph Stalin. To comprehend who Putin really is, let us take a look into his meteoric rise to power.

Putin was born in Soviet Russia and grew up as a rather rebellious teenager; He played the guitar and listened to contraband Beatles songs. However, his aims were clear from the very beginning. To pursue his dream of becoming a KGB secret agent, he joined the secret police force in 1975 and was posted in Dresden, East Germany during the calamitous period of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but only as an officer. Sensing a dissolution of the Union on the way, he returned to Leningrad in 1990 and is claimed to have resigned with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on the 20 th of August 1991, the second day of the attempted coup d'état against the then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Putin has been quoted as saying “As soon as the coup began, I immediately decided which side I was on.”

During his time in Leningrad, he worked in the International Affairs department of the Leningrad State University, where he rekindled his friendship with a former professor of his–Anatoly Sobchak–who would go on to be the Mayor of St Petersburg. Putin’s entry into politics was in fact through Professor Anatoly, who appointed him as the deputy mayor of the city during his mayoral tenure. After serving 5 years in that office, ā Anatoly lost the ticket to run for mayor again and so in June of 1996, Putin made his way to Moscow. Just within a year of being in Moscow, he fetched a place in the good books of the first Russian President, Boris Yeltsin-the first domino in Putin's Machiavellian design.

From 1997 to 1998, Yeltsin appointed Putin as the Chief of the Presidential Staff and the Director of the Federal Security Services (FSB), the successor to the KGB. Putin’s first premiership came to him on the 9 th of August 1999, when he was appointed as one of the three deputy Prime Ministers. He was then appointed acting Prime Minister of the Government of the Russian Federation by President Yeltsin who announced that he wanted to see Putin as his successor. Putin also agreed to run for the presidency—and it might be hard to digest, but all of it happened on the same day (yeah, quite a long day for him). Within a week, the State Duma approved his appointment, making him the fifth Russian PM in less than 18 months. Yeltsin was a rather embarrassing President to have. He was a frequently ill, unstable alcoholic who would often show up to diplomatic events in a drunken state (although it is said he allegedly suffered from an “unspecified neurological disorder” that affected his sense of balance).

However, most importantly, he was caught in a massive corruption scandal which could end with him and his family spending their lives behind bars. So, Yeltsin did what he thought best, and struck a deal with a fairly unknown young politician–bartering his power and authority for his freedom. President Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned on the eve of the millennia, 31 st of December 1999, making Putin the Acting President of the Russian Federation. The first Presidential Decree that Putin signed that day was titled "On guarantees for the former president of the Russian Federation and members of his family" which ensured that "corruption charges against the outgoing President and his relatives" would not be pursued. While all of us do smell a quid pro quo, the Russian people didn't and Putin was officially elected and sworn in as the second President of the Russian Federation in May 2000, marking the beginning of his premiership.

An authoritarian leader from day one, Putin started off his Presidency by gauging the loyalty of the Russian Oligarchs, the millionaires and billionaires who had, in a way, gotten Putin into office. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, at one point the richest man in Russia, was one such oligarch who raised concern about Putin’s corrupt government and had a fall-out with the President during a televised meeting at the Kremlin. In 2003 he was arrested by Russian authorities, charged with fraud and tax evasion, sentenced to ten years in prison and then exiled to the UK in 2013. Boris Berezovsky was another self-styled tycoon who criticized the Putin Government and commented on the Kremlin’s involvement in the orchestrated assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian intelligence officer and whistle-blower poisoned to death in 2009. Boris was found “hanging under mysterious circumstances” in his apartment in the UK, where he was in a self-imposed exile.

After serving two consecutive terms in the Presidential office, Putin ran for Prime Minister once again in 2008, as the constitution didn’t allow him a longer duration of Presidency. During this period, Dmitry Medvedev, a trusted associate of Putin took office as President and amended the constitution to extend the Presidential term from 4 years to 6 years. This effectively meant that a president only had to get re-elected once, to serve the equivalent of 3 terms-12 years. Of course, it was no surprise when Putin ran for president again in 2012 and won by landslide margins due to the lack of significant opposition (that perhaps, goes without saying) Standing in 2020, Putin seems to be the epitome of the saying, “If you can't adapt yourself to the world, make the world adapt itself to you,” for he has once again amended the constitution simply to clear his way towards a complete authoritarian regime, one where his presidency lasts till the year 2036.

But whenever one talks of the referendum, there are two things to be kept in mind: First, Putin didn’t actually need to call for this vote, especially given the fact that it had already been ratified by the national parliament in Moscow and regional legislatures across the country, but he still went ahead and did it simply to show that the people of Russia support him. In reality it was credible evidence needed for Putin to counter Western “conspiracies” and allegations. Secondly, the referendum also brought about many other changes including enshrining ‘protection of pensions, family values, animals, the Russian language and the memory of Russians killed in World War II’. These were the key slogans highlighted in the campaigns for the referendum, while the core change allowing for 4 consecutive presidential runs was simply overlooked. There was a simple yes/no vote on the referendum which meant voting “no” would imply that you were an anti-nationalist who dishonoured the contribution of the Russian soldiers killed-in-action fighting Nazis, and didn’t value the traditions Russian society is built on. So, if you look at it this way, they really didn’t have much of a choice.

From the very looks of it, it is evident. In Russia’s democratic simulacrum, you can vote how you like–the result is always Putin. Putin provides the people of Russia with some sense of stability in exchange for their freedom. It is maybe an understandable exchange given all that Russia has been through, but the trouble with a strong-man like Putin is this: he’s stable until suddenly, one day, he’s not. What happens then? Well, we don’t know yet.