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RUSSIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD IN THE WAKE OF THE 'PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS'

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In Russia, foreign policy comes within the purview of the president. It is therefore worth taking stock of Russia's relations with its immediate neighbourhood following the 'presidential elections.' Although the concomitant government reshuffle does raise questions about the future of the Putin System, there are no major changes on the horizon for what is referred to as the 'near abroad.' In all probability, Russia will continue to differentiate even more clearly between conservative-illiberal, pragmatic, and pro-Western-liberal neighbours. The latter will continue to come under particular pressure.

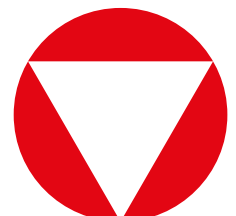
Acclaiming a leader in times of war

The Russian 'presidential elections' produced a clear winner in long-term ruler Vladimir Putin with 87.3% of the vote and 77.4% voter turnout. For the first time, the 'elections' took place over three days from 15 to 17 March 2024. This and the debut of electronic voting in almost a third of the regions provided additional opportunities for electoral fraud. According to observers, these were the most heavily manipulated elections in 30 years. Nevertheless, Putin would probably have been 'elected' with a majority in the first round of voting even without the alleged manipulations, as there was no real alternative. Serious opponents such as Boris Nadezhdin were not allowed to stand as candidates. Putin is omnipresent in the Russian information sphere. People are therefore often unfamiliar with the other names on the ballot papers, or only know a few of them. Putin is generally associated with stability and greatness. A telephone survey conducted by Russian Field among 1,625 Russians before the election showed

that 47% would vote for Putin and 'only' 41% for a „worthy and suitable“ alternative candidate.

Terror reveals weaknesses

However, spectacular terrorist attacks shortly after Putin's 'election victory' at the end of March near Moscow, and at the end of June in Dagestan overshadow the show of unity. They show how much Islamist terrorism is present despite the massive surveillance apparatus. According to its own information, the Russian domestic intelligence service FSB has prevented over 100 terrorist attacks since February 2022. The fact that 76 of the attacks prevented and two successful attacks were not carried out by domestic terrorists, but by militants organised by "Ukraine and the West" according to the Russian government narrative, is probably also an attempt to qualify the failure of its own security forces. Russian authorities were actually warned by



Western intelligence services before the attack on Crocus City Hall in March 2024, which claimed over 140 lives. However, current events do not yet appear to be causing any major unrest among the population.

The war economy cabinet

The Russian government under Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin resigned in accordance with the constitution when Putin was re-inaugurated as president on 7 May. Mishustin was confirmed as prime minister. His government comprises ten deputy prime ministers and 21 ministers. However, with only six personnel changes, it was the smallest personnel reshuffle in 15 years. Yet, Putin surprised everyone by replacing Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu with economist Andrei Belousov. Shoigu was appointed Secretary of the Security Council, which corresponds to a nominally powerful post closer to the President, but at the same time probably involves less direct influence.

Even before their move to the Security Council, several high-ranking generals from Shoigu's immediate circle were arrested, *inter alia* on corruption charges. Several deputy ministers resigned immediately after Shoigu's dismissal. Further officers were detained in the days that followed. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained the change in the defence ministry with, *inter alia*, the increase in military spending and more efficient allocation of funds to the defence industry. It is highly unlikely that corruption in the defence sector will decrease, but the money is likely to be redistributed within the elite. Some observers already see a battle of the elites between the FSB and the Ministry of Defence behind the arrests. In any case, Putin is safeguarding his power against an overly strong Ministry of Defence. Belousov has no power base in the armed forces. Some of his deputies come from Putin's circle or relatives. Chief of Defence Staff Valery Gerasimov has not yet been affected by the changes.

This is probably intended to ensure that the war is impacted as little as possible by the personnel changes. From a purely legal point of view, Gerasimov can stay in office until his seventieth birthday, i.e. for another year.

An ageing elite

With the restructuring of his administration, Putin is gearing his fifth term of office towards a long-term foreign policy conflict. Domestically, however, a stagnating and ageing establishment is emerging around the 71-year-old president. With his renewed extension of office, 74-year-old Sergey Lavrov is now the longest-serving foreign minister since Tsarist Russia. Young newcomers have hardly been entrusted with relevant leadership positions. This also has an indirect effect on Russia's foreign relations, because while a 'post-Soviet' generation has already assumed leadership in countries such as Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova, other states in the 'near abroad' such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are characterised by similarly old elites with good relations to Moscow. These rely to a large extent on the shared experiences and socialisation in the USSR.

Varieties of the 'near abroad'

The concept of the 'near abroad' has been part of Russia's foreign policy since the 1990s. In its 2023 foreign policy concept, Moscow maintains its hegemonic role. One of its aims is to prevent and counter "*unfriendly actions of foreign states and their alliances, which provoke disintegration processes in the near abroad and create obstacles to the exercise of the sovereign right of Russia's allies and partners to deepen their comprehensive cooperation with Russia.*" Some neighbouring countries, however, do not see their future under a Russian hegemon. In Putin's fifth term of office, Russia's neighbours are therefore likely to fall even more clearly into three camps: a conservative-illiberal,

a pragmatic, and a pro-Western-liberal one. Good relations are possible with conservative countries such as Belarus, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

The pragmatic 'near abroad' treads a fine line between increased cooperation with Western partners, partly illiberal domestic policies, and keeping the Kremlin happy. Russia under Putin will probably try hard to keep its pragmatic neighbours within its sphere of influence. One example of this is **Azerbaijan**. Its head of state Ilham Aliyev studied in Moscow during the Soviet era. Like Putin, Aliyev has ruled unchallenged as an authoritarian ruler for over 20 years. Both rulers are on the same wavelength, for example on key strategic issues such as the fight against the influence of 'Western values' in their states.

Georgia also behaves pragmatically and, at least until the beginning of this year, tried to maintain good relations with the EU and Russia. However, since the spring, the ruling Georgian Dream party has adopted a much more confrontational policy *vis-à-vis* the EU. In particular, the adoption of the controversial transparency law has clouded relations with Brussels. It enables state control of civil society organisations and media which receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad. These must declare themselves "organisations representing the interests of foreign powers." In the rhetoric of the government and the party founder and oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia must protect itself from being co-opted by "the global war party." In view of these illiberal tendencies, it is understandable that the massive protest of (particularly young) civil society reflects fears of a development similar to that in Russia since 2012.

Armenia has also been pro-Western since 2024. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is striving for a peace treaty with Azerbaijan. France, the EU and the USA are seen as new security policy partners, especially after Russia failed to fulfil its obligations to provide assistance to

Yerevan following the escalation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in 2022. Russia's reputation also suffered when the 'peacekeepers' in Nagorno-Karabakh failed to prevent the final takeover by Azerbaijan in September 2023. Although Pashinyan favours a pro-Western course, Armenia is still heavily dependent on Russia. In addition, Pashinyan currently faces an opposition vociferously protesting and criticising his policy towards Azerbaijan as too acquiescent or even treacherous. For both Moscow and Baku, however, the advance of Western players in Armenia is unacceptable. For the time being, Russia 'only' protests and exudes certainty that Armenia will not drift into the Western camp.

The situation is similar in the **Republic of Moldova**. Under President Maja Sandu, a clear course towards the EU has been set. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the country has intensified its efforts. Accession negotiations have been officially underway since the end of June 2024. The Kremlin wants to counteract this development in the upcoming presidential elections in October 2024. If Sandu cannot be prevented, she should at least emerge weakened from the election. Moscow expects a change in policy in the parliamentary elections in spring at the latest, with pro-Russian parties winning a majority again. A key player in this is Ilan Shor, a fugitive oligarch.

Russian accusations against Zelensky

Russia's main enemy in the fight against liberal-democratic trends in the 'near abroad' remains Ukraine. Militarily, the situation seems increasingly deadlocked. Russia therefore also focuses on the information sphere and has been attacking the legitimacy of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky since Putin's re-election. His term of office would, regularly, have ended on 21 May. Russia, and Putin in particular, therefore no longer recognise him as the legitimate head of state. According to the Russian

narrative, only the Ukrainian parliament (Rada) still has democratic legitimacy.

Due to the war, no elections can currently be held in Ukraine. The government in Kyiv also relies on the will of the population, which does not consider elections to be currently necessary. There is also an elite consensus, which is underpinned by a Rada resolution. Regular elections are not to take place again until six months after the lifting of martial law throughout Ukraine. Free and fair elections are a challenge during martial law due to the restrictions on civil liberties, in particular media freedom. There are also security issues. For example, polling stations could become targets of Russian attacks. In principle, the Ukrainian constitution only provides for the suspension of parliamentary elections during martial law. The incumbent Rada remains in office. For presidential and local elections, only the electoral law would have to be amended. However, with around 65% support from the population, Zelensky does not yet appear to need legitimacy through elections. Western supporters do not appear to be pushing for elections either, at least not at present. However, opponents of further arms deliveries and loans to Ukraine sometimes argue that there is a 'lack of democracy' in Ukraine, although this does not stand up to scrutiny. In the event of a victory for Donald Trump, however, the election issue could possibly take on greater significance.

Derivations

- Putin's new administration does not evince any significant change in foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the 'near abroad.' Cooperation with conservative-illiberal heads of state will be further intensified. An increasing split in the EU's and Russia's shared neighbourhood can therefore be taken for granted.
- The rejection of 'Western values' (such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy) in parts of the political elite in the 'near abroad' is being used by Russia to dissuade neighbouring states from pursuing a pro-Western policy (e.g. Georgia). The EU and Austria should continue to respect and support the will of the local population.
- Russia's pro-Western neighbours will be under particular pressure during Putin's fifth term. His latest peace offer to Kyiv underlines the fact that he does not seek peaceful coexistence with a sovereign Ukraine, but demands submission. This not only applies to Ukraine. Austria could continue to work within the EU framework to strengthen the resilience of these states. An expansion of civilian EU missions within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy to support reforms such as those in Ukraine or Moldova should be promoted.

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