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Three Is Not a Charm

By Konstantin Sonin

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As stipulated by the Constitution, President Vladimir Putin recently presented his state-of-the-nation address -- by rights his penultimate contribution in this category -- to the Federal Assembly. Immediately afterward, he announced that he had already been pondering the problem of choosing a successor in 2008 for some six years, since shortly after he took office. He also said he could not simply leave his post with a click of the heels and a hearty "Here's the reins, see you around!" Sensing the changes in the president's tone -- before this Putin had always simply said he would depart on schedule -- Voronezh Governor Vladimir Kulakov leaped to the forefront with a proposal to amend the Constitution.

The idea of a third term not only contradicts the Constitution, it contradicts common sense. Limitations on presidential terms are introduced into Constitutions not to deal with the eventuality of an unpopular president who craves a third try at the office but, rather, for exactly the kind of case we have here, where the president is popular.

Overlong periods in office bring no joy to the citizenry, as the tempo of economic development flags; nor are they good for the leaders themselves. In the second half of the 20th century, not one democratically elected president who violated the term limitations in force at the time of his inauguration and remained for a third term was able to bring the act off successfully. There are a number of "violators" whose stories are still in progress -- Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko, Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe; Alvaro Uribe of Colombia is only running for a second term, and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez is merely threatening to do away with term limitations. Also of note, Argentina's Carlos Menem and Brazil's Fernando Henrique Cardoso successfully removed barriers limiting them to single terms, but at the price of significant reductions in the lengths of the terms themselves -- and they were forced to leave office after their second rounds anyway.

The prime examples of bad third-termers -- Argentina's Juan Peron, Peru's Alberto Fujimori, the Phillipines' Ferdinand Marcos and Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic -- have all gone down in history as failed leaders and exiles, while the creator of the South Korean miracle, Park Chung-hee, in the end was shot by his own security service. Things would not have worked out this way if these men, who were still popular after two successful terms, had not stayed on for a third. Had they left, it is possible they would have remained great leaders by their countries' standards. Even the experience of the successful non-democracies of the period, Mexico and China, indicates the possibility that the institution of changing leaders may be an even better guarantee of stability than free elections.

But common sense and the experience of other countries notwithstanding, a third term still looks like the most likely scenario here. In the first place, in Russia, as in practically any country, it's impossible to leave power only partially, regardless of what agreements are made between the former leader and the successor. For a popular politician like Putin, the choice between all and nothing will be particularly difficult. Second, according to polls, the leading potential successors to Putin are both well-known and unpopular -- a most unpromising combination. And third, a successful transfer of power to a designated successor is a rarity in democracies, and almost unheard of under dictatorships.

If Putin leaves in 2008 -- really, and for good -- he will have a chance at being considered Russia's most successful leader in a century. If he remains for a third term -- whether with the help of a constitutional amendment, a merger with Belarus, or a transition to a parliamentary form of leadership with him in the role of majority leader -- then that chance is gone. Then in five or 10 years (if not by 2010), we'll have to start glasnost and perestroika up all over again.

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