

Putin and Medvedev: Instruments of the Russian Security Class?

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ANDREI CONSTANTIN, JAN 23 2013

To what extent has the Russian Presidency under Putin and Medvedev Become an Instrument of the Russian Security Class?

This essay will try to disprove the notion that the Russian presidency under Putin and Medvedev has become an instrument of the Russian security class. The apparent dominance of the security class does not mean it was the sole, or even the most decisive, influence. Most important, no matter what the designs of this specific class were, the evolution of the presidency has extended beyond their control (Shevtsova 1995). If we are to understand Russia's hegemonic presidency we have to look at the formal institutions that comprise the federal executive and the arrangements that tie the presidency and executive to other political actors, but also at the officials and interests that form the president's 'team.' The truth behind Russian decision-making is that a lot of it happens behind the scenes and involves numerous informal relationships among both governmental and private actors (Willerton 2005, 33). Even if the Russian security class has gathered a lot of power within the Russian presidency, I will try to prove that there are other important administrative factions that serve as balances. After creating the necessary background for this essay, I will analyse Putin's and Medvedev's presidencies in order to highlight the influence of the security class. My opinion regarding the role of this specific class within the Russian presidency will become clear with the help of the authors cited in this essay such as: Richard Sakwa, Daniel Treisman, Lulia Shevchenko and others.

Putin's presidency had a specific hallmark in comparison with the turbulent Yeltsin years. The former's regime had personnel stability, accommodation of already entrenched interests, a gradual but constant elevation of trusted associates, and coalition-building across competing interests both within presidential administration and with other political actors. The diversity of elements within the emergent Putin team was at least as great as that of Yeltsin, with a balancing of interests that precluded any single factional element or class from becoming dominant. Throughout his presidency, Putin has demonstrated a remarkable finesse in juggling competing aspirations, and his mastery of the hegemonic presidency proved an accomplishment that could not be assumed at the unexpected onset of his tenure (Sakwa 2008). As Lulia Shevchenko points out, Putin is different from Yeltsin, who constantly changed officials, because he separates himself from people with greater difficulty. She continues to say that, similarly to Yeltsin, the president is surrounded by rival groups, struggling for his favour. By late 2003 it became clear that the members of Yeltsin's 'Family' ceased to be important political actors. However, as soon as this 'external threat' was reduced, latent tensions, which had existed within the St. Petersburg clan became apparent. The clan was divided in two groups: the representatives of the 'power ministries' also called the Petersburg Chekists, and their opponents – the Petersburg economists and lawyers. Several business leaders and the 'remnants of the old Kremlin regime' were said to have favoured the latter group (Shevchenko 2004, 171).

Accepting Shevchenko's idea one should not be surprised by the prevalence of the security class in the Russian state under Putin. Many of Putin's friends, associates, and contacts were from a security related background, and in post-Soviet Russia the tradition has been for leaders to appoint long-time friends and associates to government positions. However, the presence of so many former intelligence officials, with their authoritarian ideology, does not provide us with a good enough reason to state that the Russian presidency became an instrument of the security

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class (Kotz and Weir 2007). This Russian tradition is also true for many economic and political reformers who have assumed political senior roles in Putin's administration. Many of them came to the Kremlin from St. Petersburg with Putin, and began their executive work early in the first term (Willerton 2005). Nevertheless, some analysts have commented on the growing role of intelligence agents or 'power agents', known as *siloviki*, during the Putin era. For example Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White found in 2003 that the *siloviki* made up about one-third of government functionaries, about sixty percent of Putin's inner circle, and seventy percent of the staff working for the Kremlin's seven regional emissaries. They also concluded that the *siloviki* were often placed in high government posts in a manner suggesting that they have the role of 'watchdog' over the government's professional managers. This practice closely resembles the former Soviet system of party commissars (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003).

Having created the necessary background for answering the main question of the essay, I will now focus on the *siloviki* – who they are and what they stand for. I will also consider their relation to other groups who are dependent on the presidency. In this case it is important to consider Igor Pantin's work which sheds some light on the Russian political elite. It consists of different groups and factions, whose interests and ideological views differ and often come into conflict. He correctly argues that we are not only dealing with the established Petersburg Liberals and *siloviki*, but more importantly with all the representatives and lobbying interests of the fuel, energy and military-industrial complexes. These latter groups play a large and in some ways decisive role in presidential decision-making, and they also serve as influential counterweights against the Petersburg groups (Pantin 2011). Looking at this problem from another way, one can state that these factions (notably the security establishment and the liberal economists) represented real domestic constituencies to which the leadership had to respond. Hence, the balancing strategy proved to be an effective way of managing them, even though the price was the 'political stalemate inherent in the passive revolution' (Sakwa 2011, 131). In regards to the balancing process, Fyodor Gavrilov, a St. Petersburg columnist, said Putin was 'using the St. Petersburg people first of all because he knows them' adding that 'at best, he will use the intelligentsia for ideas and the ex-KGB men to put them into practice' (cited in Truscott 2004, 134). In my opinion, this latter statement sums up Putin's power of manipulation, which allowed him to retain the presidency's autonomy, and assume the title of the Kremlin's Puppet Master.

Much foreign attention has been given to the security-intelligence elements – what Russians refer to as the *siloviki* or the Petersburg Chekists – who represent a significant component in the senior leadership. The *siloviki* began coming to power under Yeltsin, but this accelerated with Putin's rise to the position of Prime Minister and then of President. It is challenging to draw a broad picture that precisely captures a common interest or shared set of perspectives for all officials drawn from the security-intelligence environment. Many assume the *siloviki* have a natural preference for the re-emergence of a strong Russian state and may be less sensitive to the niceties of the democratic system. The regime's *siloviki* present themselves as disciplined professionals, who are generally well-educated, and some even bring past commercial experience to their government posts (Willerton 2005, 34). Daniel Treisman argues that their aim is not to rebuild Soviet institutions, which they recognize had rotted by the end, but to restore order. Politically, that means to them averting the state's decay into ethnic pitfalls. Economically, it means protecting the national wealth from swindlers and investing it in projects to develop the raw materials and industrial sectors simultaneously. He adds that foreign investors are welcomed, but only as junior partners; while technocrats are kept in the cabinet to provide macroeconomic stability and credibility with the West. The truth is that the image of the *siloviki* as saviours of Russian society is getting harder and harder to sell to the public. In order to prove his statement, Treisman (2007, 6) uses polls from the independent Levada Centre, which show that in 2005 only 24 percent of respondents thought order had increased in recent years, and 68 percent thought the country had become less orderly. The share saying that stealing and corruption had increased under Putin tripled from 15 percent in 2002 to 45 percent in October 2005. During the same period, the share saying that corruption had decreased fell from 20 to 10 percent. In my opinion, these polls represent hard evidence that the *siloviki's* grip on power is getting weaker, and that their actions are getting noticed by the public – actions which signal the beginning of the end for the *siloviki*.

Some of the Petersburg Chekists had come across Putin during his Leningrad KGB days, and in this sense they shared a similar background with him. Most prominent was Putin's closest confidant and ex-SVR man Sergei Ivanov, but other leading figures were FSB head Nikolai Patrushev and north-west Russia plenipotentiary Victor Cherkesov. Other members were ex-KGB men Igor Sechin (head of the president's office) and Victor Ivanov, a former KGB general (Truscott 2004, 191). They were also part of Putin's 'inner court', and they dominated the informal 'politburo'

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which met on Saturday mornings (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005). Many scholars have challenged the alleged pre-eminent role of the *siloviki*, but Bettina Renz (2006) approached the topic from a different perspective. She questions whether the growth of the *silovik* numbers was a deliberative strategy by Putin to enhance their influence and thereby to create a more authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, she argues that there was no common 'military mindset' among them promoting relatively more authoritarian policies. In her view, they are far from dominant in the policy-making process. Renz supports her opinion with figures from the presidential administration in 2005 when only nine of forty-seven leading officials had a security background, and none of the nine was in the top echelons of power; while only two of ten presidential advisers were *siloviki*. She concludes by defending Putin because he simply relied on people with whom he had worked in the past, and security officials were just one group of many. Contrary to Olga Kryshtanovskaya's theory, Renz (2006) insists that they certainly did not constitute a coherent clan as the concept of 'militocracy' implies.

To further develop this essay I will look at the *siloviki*'s role in domestic and foreign affairs. In the domestic realm, the appointment of five *siloviki* as heads of the seven federal districts when they were established in 2000 has often been used as evidence that the *siloviki* had come to power, but since then the replacements to the original seven have had a diverse background. Richard Sakwa (2011, 140) argues that, despite much talk of a surge of generals coming to power in the regions, this has not been the case in practice. In the twenty-six gubernatorial elections held in *oblasts* and *krais* between 2000 and 2001, candidates from security agencies participated in only four (Kaliningrad, Kamchatka, Voronezh, and Ulyanovsk) and won in only three of them. Having similar views as Bettina Renz, he concludes that it would be an overstatement to say that regional politics under Putin have been 'militarised.' Meanwhile, foreign policy was a sphere relatively insulated from factional conflict. In this case, Rivera and Rivera (2006, 127) note that 'few analysts have expressed the expectation that a Kremlin dominated by *siloviki* will behave more aggressively in the international arena or observed any actual increase in the use of force by Moscow.' They continue to say that Russia's more aggressive foreign-policy stance in the late Putin years was advanced with as much energy by the Petersburg Liberals as it was by the *siloviki*. Foreign policy was, to a certain extent, '*siloviki*-free' because it was dominated by Putin personally, whose aim was to balance the various national interests while promoting a policy of Russian autonomy abroad.

All of these connections between Putin and the *siloviki* have invited political observers to discuss about the Kremlin in a very familiar way. Treisman points out the similarities between Yeltsin's 'Family', and Putin's network of *siloviki* and state oligarchs, who are referred to as *Korporatsia* – the Corporation. He continues to say that regardless of the apparent war between Putin and the oligarchs, there actually exists a limited alliance that unites the 'Corporation' and the 'Family' (Treisman 2007, 7). Nonetheless, this astonishing personnel 'merry-go-round' belies the seriousness of the affair. Considering Putin's dependence on security structures, it was not surprising that they should become the focus of bureaucratic-factional power struggles. However, the intensity of the conflicts within the law-enforcement and secret services was unexpected and ultimately represented a threat to the presidency itself (Sakwa 2011, 190). Given these circumstances, Putin turned to other groups, especially the Petersburg Liberals, in order to balance the influence of the *siloviki*. In this sense, Pavel Baev (2004) argues that the appointments from within the Liberal group represented a cautiously arrangement for the strengthening of a new political clan – the Finansisty – in the shadows of the apparently all-powerful Chekists. The 'Finansisty' and the Petersburg Liberals suffered a lot from the Yukos affair, and their influence never recovered under Putin's presidency to the levels of his first three years in power. However, when it came to the succession dilemma, Putin proved his independence from the *siloviki*, and with the election of Medvedev as the new Russian President, he managed to tilt the balance of the system in favour of the liberal-technocrats (Sakwa 2011).

This brings us to the process of choosing Putin's successor. This was very important because the new president would play a crucial role in the survival of Putin's system. While the liberals had a number of possible candidates, including Dmitri Medvedev and even Sergei Ivanov; the *siloviki* had no credible candidate of their own whom they could advance. It was for this reason that they sought to persuade Putin, by fair means or foul, to stay on for a third term. Already in early 2007, many were arguing that the *siloviki* could resort to a strategy of 'managed instability' to ensure that Putin was forced to stay on for another term. Even if they did not fully succeed in 2008, one could argue that the *siloviki* are still powerful within the administration because they got their way with the 2012 elections when Putin was elected as president for a third time (Bremmer and Charap 2007). For the March 2008 election, Putin used

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considerable political capital in pushing through the succession operation and he achieved his main goal: an orderly succession of power without unsettling the conventional 'pattern of factional interests.' His successor was in no position to challenge the powerful factions, even though he represented none of them (Sakwa 2011, 356). In this sense, Medvedev had limited scope to restructure the political elite but he could influence the systemic balance. He had to use Putin's networks as a presidential resource in order to consolidate his own power because he was lacking extensive social support and a political base of his own. Although, this was a recipe for policy stagnation and continued political deadlock, Gleb Pavlovsky argued that it represented 'a demonstration of Russian political strength, not weakness' (Leonard et al. 2009, 74).

The Medvedev succession did not change the constitution, and Putin did not have to yield to demands to stay on for a third term. However, Putin remained as prime minister, and thus the succession was complete. The constitution established a dual executive (although technically the president stands above the executive), and now this was reinforced by political realities (Wegren and Herspring 2010). However, the ultimate test for the new system was just about to start. According to Stefan Hedlund (2008, 37) this test 'will lie in the Kremlin's ability to maintain a balance among rival factions, a task that will not be made easier by the cohabitation of Putin and Medvedev.' One can see that Medvedev had two ways for solving this problem: he could either adopt a strategy based on building his own team, or choose the path of institutional reform. In these circumstances, Medvedev adopted 'soft' versions of both but tended towards the second one. Many argued that he was not ready to enter into 'full-blooded conflict with the Putinite establishment' (Sakwa 2011, 314). This was a result of Medvedev's lack of affiliation with any of the factions. While this gave him room for political manoeuvre, it also deprived him of a power base which meant that he lacked the political and strategic resources to replace Putin as the ultimate referee. Medvedev was not able to arbitrate between the various factional conflicts, and thus it was left to Putin to exercise this function. Therefore, Putin also became the faction manager, covering for Medvedev and ensuring that none of the factions became predominant or endangered the 'tandem's policy agenda' (Sakwa 2011, 312).

In this essay I have argued that even if the security class has grown stronger under Putin's first two terms, it has never reached the point from where it could fully control the Russian presidency. Contrary to the *silovik* clan's importance, this essay has proved that it has actually started to lose some of its power and influence. This was evident with the 2008 election, when Medvedev came to power. His victory did not represent the end of the *silovik* faction, but it did deteriorate their influence in the presidential administration. For the first time in twenty years, the influence of the *siloviki* in Russian governance weakened. By contrast, Medvedev's presidency confirmed the rise of the 'civiliki,' which reflected his status as a civil lawyer and scholar (Stack 2008). It also represented an opportunity to move beyond the Putin era, but unlike so often in Russia's past when a new leader renounces the bequest of his forerunner, the succession operation was designed to ensure that this would be done with Putin and not against him. In sum, this arrangement was put in place in order for 'Putinism' to survive and the administrative balance to remain stable despite the remaining tensions between the different factions. Above all, Medvedev's presidency represented a chance to surpass the dual state by strengthening the effective powers of the constitutional state while weakening the powers of the administrative regime (Blank 2008).

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