

Analysis

The *Siloviki* in Russian Politics: Political Strategy or a Product of the System?

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Abstract

Many observers have interpreted the rising number of *siloviki* in Russian politics as a conscious policy choice pursued by President Putin. In view of the Russian system of elite recruitment and the widely varying backgrounds of these figures, however, their role seems more modest than often asserted and the possibility of a coordinated “*siloviki* project” is unlikely.

Putin and the “Force Structures”

Since Vladimir Putin's election in March 2000 as president of the Russian Federation, the appointment of politicians and high-ranking officials with a force-structure background – the so-called *siloviki* as defined in the supplement to this article – has attracted the attention of academic analysts and journalists both in Russia and in the West. One dominant interpretation of this phenomenon has been to evaluate such appointments as a conscious political strategy and as an expression of a more authoritarian policy direction pursued by Putin, himself a former KGB officer. Some commentators, particularly political scientists Olga Kryshchanovskaya and Stephen White, even went as far as to assert that Putin's ultimate goal was the establishment of a “militocracy.” According to these experts, such a system dominated by *siloviki* would increasingly come to resemble the merely formal democracy of the Soviet Union.

The appointment of *siloviki* to political posts is not unique to the Putin era and should not be over-emphasized as a characteristic of his leadership alone. According to a recalculation of Kryshchanovskaya and White's data by the American analyst Sharon Rivera, the numbers of *siloviki* in political and official posts have risen monotonically since perestroika and the practice was relatively common, particularly in the second half of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. The noticeable rise in the numbers of such appointments since Putin's election to the presidency cannot be overlooked. The significance of this, however, requires further investigation. In view of the specific system of elite recruitment in contemporary Russia and considering the widely varying backgrounds of *siloviki*, a conscious political strategy for the establishment of a “militocracy” is unlikely.

Russian Patterns of Elite Recruitment

It is important to contextualise the rise in the numbers of *siloviki* within the framework of the post-Soviet political system and, particularly, the under-institutionalized mechanism of elite recruitment.

Treated as a phenomenon in isolation, an increase in politicians with a background in the military and security services will inevitably be evaluated as anti-democratic. This is the case particularly if approached from a Western point of view holding that a “military beyond politics” is fundamental to democratic governance. When Putin became acting president in December 1999 he was faced with a political system that has been termed by the British political scientist Richard Sakwa as a “regime system of rule.”

One characteristic of this system was that the formation of government was only tenuously linked to the outcome of elections, the parliament or political parties represented in the latter. Instead, political appointments were highly personalized and determined by the president's construction of tactical combinations aimed at maintaining a balance focused on himself. Within this context, personal links and loyalty were the predominant factor for political appointments under Yeltsin, whose regime centered on the so-called “Family” – a fluid group of favored Kremlin insiders. These included powerful oligarchs like Boris Berezovskii and Roman Abramovich, but also less prominent figures, such as the head of Yeltsin's presidential administration, Aleksandr Voloshin and Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko.

When Putin became acting president in December 1999 he “inherited” this political system. No institutionalized channels of elite recruitment were available to him and the political regime was highly personalized. As such, this system both allowed him to and, to an extent, left him no choice but to rely, at least in part, on representatives of the force structures. Putin had only five months experience in federal politics and lacked a ready-made shadow government able to run the state machine. Thus, in addition to retaining key figures of the Yeltsin era, Putin formed his government by relying on trusted individuals he had previously worked with. Several high-profile posts went to

his former colleagues from the Leningrad KGB and to other FSB officers, some of whom had served under his directorship from July 1998 until 1999. Former Russian Defense Minister and current First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov and presidential aide Viktor Ivanov are prominent examples of high-profile officials of Putin's early KGB years. However, a number of important posts also went to "civilian" economists whom Putin had worked with in the St. Petersburg city administration of Mayor Anatolii Sobchak. According to Rivera's abovementioned study, the expansion under Putin of the role of individuals with a business background and training in economics and law in the Russian elite is often underestimated.

Siloviki in Putin's "Team"

One would expect a strategy of government based on force structure representatives to be evident in important institutions, such as the presidential administration and federal ministries. However, the numbers of *siloviki* appointed to key posts in these institutions do not clearly support the idea that the appointment of force-structure representatives is a conscious policy pursued by Putin. In 2004 Putin replaced the head of his first administration, Yeltsin appointee Aleksandr Voloshin, with the civilian lawyer, Dmitrii Medvedev. Medvedev in turn was replaced in November 2005 with the regional politician, Sergei Sobyanin. According to the biographical data of 46 leading officials in Putin's administration published on the Kremlin website, eight have a force-structure background. None of these are in the top three positions of the administration (chairman and two deputy chairmen). Many of them are active in advisory roles for military-related subjects directly relevant to their previous experience. Others are long-serving members of the administration who were appointed to their posts already during Yeltsin's presidency.

With regard to the federal ministries, clear evidence of a consciously pursued strategy for the establishment of a "militocracy" is lacking. Five of 21 federal ministers are of a force-structure background. However, three of them are at the helm of ministries belonging to the force structures (the interior ministry, the defense ministry, and the ministry for emergency situations). The heading of such ministries by *siloviki*, rather than by civilians, is traditional in Russia and not a characteristic of the Putin era. Yeltsin's interior ministers, for example, were all *siloviki* with a background in the interior ministry.

Militarizing Politics?

Many commentators and politicians in Russia see Putin's reliance on the loyalty of former col-

leagues, particularly in the early stages of his presidency, as the obvious explanation for the increasing numbers of *siloviki* in political and official posts. The decisive factors for such appointments, in their opinion, are personal links and loyalty typical of the personalization of the political system of post-Soviet Russia, rather than these persons' background in the force structures as such. Valerii Ostanin, a former Yabloko deputy, accurately summarized this view: "The mechanism of elite recruitment under Yeltsin and Putin is the same. They included people in their entourage who were personally devoted to them, who came from the same institution, from the same community. There is nothing new in this."

Critics of such a view might justifiably suggest that even if the rising numbers of *siloviki* under Putin were not the result of a strategic plan, this insight does not change the fact that their presence might push Russia into a generally more authoritarian policy direction. Indeed, analysts including Kryshanovskaya and White have been concerned particularly with the anticipation of more undemocratic or authoritarian politics resulting from the military frame of mind setting *siloviki* apart from their civilian counterparts.

However, the significance of a politician's background in the military or security forces is not obvious. Whilst the presumption of a link between the rise in the numbers of *siloviki* and the tightening of democratic freedoms in some spheres might be intuitively appealing, it is problematic to use an individual's previous career as a guide to current action. Due to the varying institutional backgrounds, previous ranks and roles of these figures, the presumption of a shared political psychology is questionable. Simply speaking, the individuals concerned are too different to be treated as a political or analytical unity.

Heterogeneity and Blurred Delineations

In view of the wide array of functions fulfilled by *siloviki* during active service in one of the Soviet or Russian force structures, their previous ranks and roles are likely to affect the degree of their attachment to a military mind or military-style traditions. In asserting that *siloviki* accounted for 15 to 70 percent of the membership of a variety of elite groups, Kryshanovskaya and White crucially did not indicate the degree of seniority of the military personnel included in these comprehensive figures. However, taking into account the factor of previous rank, the military mindset of a conscript is likely to differ significantly from that of a high-ranking officer with a lifelong career in the force structures. In terms of the specific roles carried out by *siloviki* during their active service, differentiation

is also important. There are ten institutionally distinct force structures in contemporary Russia, whose only common denominator is a loosely defined concern with the country's defense and security. The array of activities carried out by *siloviki* in these institutions is immense. It ranges from commanding armies and divisions (prominent *siloviki* with such a background are the former governors Aleksandr Lebed and Vladimir Shamanov), to specializing in public relations and journalism (for example, Andrei Chernenko, the former head of the Federal Migration Service, and Valerii Manilov, a former Federation Council senator), and recruiting and analyzing sources of information (President Putin).

We cannot simply presume that the experience of *siloviki* in a command-oriented military organization is of lasting importance for their conduct in a civilian post, or that they will permanently act in line with the undemocratic *modus operandi* of their former employer. Many *siloviki* have long since retired from active service and have had the opportunity to adapt to the more compromise-based environment of "civilian" politics. As a result, the delineation between *silovik* and "civilian" politician is often blurred. Vladimir Putin, for example, resigned from the KGB in August 1991. When he was appointed director of the FSB in

1998 he was a bureaucrat with seven years of experience in civilian posts, including two years of experience in Yeltsin's administration.

Conclusion

The portrayal of *siloviki* as a tool in the hands of a president pursuing a more authoritarian policy direction can at best provide a simplified explanation of events and should not be taken too literally. In this respect an observation made by the American political scientist Peter Reddaway – that the *siloviki* neither have a leader, nor the means of coordinating their goals and plans – is important. The tightening under Putin of democratic freedoms in some spheres, for example the media, cannot be disputed. However, explanations of political developments should focus on actual policies rather than on the backgrounds of those implementing them. Catch-all explanations do injustice to the intricacies of Russian politics and should be eschewed in favor of assessments considering developments in all their complexities. In the words of the veteran Moscow correspondent of the German public television channel ARD, Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, "people attempting to evaluate Putin and his policies unidimensionally risk getting it wrong altogether."

About the author

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Further reading

- Olga Kryshstanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19(4), 2003, pp. 289–306.
- Bettina Renz, "“Putin's Militocracy”? An Alternative Interpretation of the Role of *Siloviki* in Contemporary Russian Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies* 18(6), 2006, pp. 903–924.
- Sharon Werning Rivera and David W. Rivera, "The Russian Elite under Putin: Militocratic or Bourgeois?" *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 22(2), 2006, pp. 125–144.
- Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, London: Routledge, 2004.