THE SILOVIKI AND AUTOCRACY IN RUSSIA: ARE THEY THE SOURCE?

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By

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ABSTRACT

A graduate student specializing in security issues in Eurasia analyzes the composition of top positions in Russian politics from 2001-2011, looking for the representation of a particular section of the Russian elite, the siloviki, and their influence upon the development of autocracy in Russia. The siloviki faction is composed of government officials with a background in the military or security services. This study was conducted on the basis of contemporary academic and media analyses of the Putin and Medvedev administrations. Also examined is elite decision-making and inter-factional politics within the Kremlin.
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Introduction

The order, stability, and economic growth of the new century provided the Russian populace with a welcome change from the chaos and unpredictability unleashed by the USSR’s collapse. These contrasting periods directly correlated with the tenure of Russia’s first two presidents in the post-Soviet era: Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The relative prosperity that Russia enjoyed under Putin gave him astounding popularity, with approval ratings often in the high 70 percent range throughout his presidency. However, democracy advocates in both Russia and the West have voiced concern over a perceived trend towards authoritarianism in Russia. This trend has been blamed by some on a new section of the elite, the siloviki, gaining power in the Russian government. The word is derived from the Russian term for the security services, or more accurately “force structures” (silovye struktury - силовые структуры), silovik (силовик) in the singular, siloviki (силовики) in the plural.

Criticism has been tempered to a small degree by Putin’s decision not to seek a change in the Russian constitution that would allow him to run for a third term. Instead Putin selected Dmitry Medvedev, a colleague from Saint Petersburg with no background in the military or security forces, to succeed him. Medvedev easily won the election in 2008 and immediately appointed Putin as prime minister. Concerns and questions have been raised as to whether this

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executive transition from a silovik to a “liberal” indicates a fundamental shift in power away from the siloviki within the Russian government itself.\(^3\)

*The Siloviki*

The siloviki are defined as anyone with a background as an official in Russia’s armed services, law enforcement bodies, or intelligence agencies.\(^4\) As a percentage of the elite, siloviki representation has significantly increased following Putin’s 2000 election victory and throughout his two terms in office. Putin himself served in the KGB for 15 years. Recent studies have claimed that up to 78 percent of Russia’s current elite could be classified as siloviki,\(^5\) creating what Olga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White call a “militocracy.” The overriding concern for such critics is that the background of the siloviki may predispose them to favor authoritarian institutions or beliefs, and that if such men gain power in a democratic government they will centralize power at the expense of democratic institutions.\(^6\)

*Research Question*

This paper examines siloviki representation to determine if in fact they are responsible for Russia’s move towards authoritarianism, by asking the question, “Have the siloviki greatly influenced politics in Russia over the past decade?” If the siloviki have had major representation in key positions of power throughout this period, then this would significantly support the argument that they are responsible. However, if they have not in fact controlled a considerable

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\(^3\) Dmitry Medvedev is considered a liberal in a relative sense. This indicates a support for economic liberalism, the protection of private property and a free-market economy more than a support for the social tenets associated with liberalism in the West such as the rights of the individual and equality.

\(^4\) Ibid., 5


number of these positions, then the decline of democracy in Russia cannot be placed squarely on their shoulders.

Methodology

As I do not have the resources nor the time to look at siloviki representation across the entire Russian government I will first examine the structure of Russia’s political system to locate the key positions of political power. Second, I will look at who has held these positions from 2001-2011. Finally, I will examine the background of each of these individuals to determine who can reliably be labeled as a silovik. Based on my results I will give my considerations on the role of the siloviki in Russia’s trend towards authoritarianism, and what we can likely expect in the future. Moreover, I do not read Russian fluently, so my sources were limited to those written in English.

Initial Findings

Based on my research, the siloviki do not appear to have maintained a representation within the top echelon of policy-making that would justify the claim that they have greatly influenced Russian politics over the past decade, and therefore cannot be accused of single-handedly pushing Russia towards autocracy. Instead, a complex array of factors have created a unique situation that has allowed the ruling elite as a whole to centralize power at the expense of democratic institutions. This should not come as a surprise given Russian political history and the complicated decision-making apparatus that characterized the Soviet Union and was so difficult for the West to completely comprehend.


Literature Review

At the core of much of the criticism is a deep distrust of the “chekist” that goes back to the founding of the Soviet state. The original state security apparatus, the State Committee for the Emergency Situation or the “Cheka”, was created under Lenin by the infamous Felix Dzerzhinsky in 1917. The organization was a key element in consolidating and maintaining the Bolshevik’s power following the October Revolution. It was essentially “an organ for the revolutionary settlement of accounts with counter-revolutionaries.” Settling accounts involved eliminating, imprisoning or cowing into submission any opposition to the state. Moreover, in an eternal quest for security from both internal and external threats the Cheka steadily built a massive network of surveillance and informers that would become the enormous Committee for State Security (KGB) of the Cold War. The members of the KGB, still referred to as “chekists,” would instill fear and suspicion in Soviet society until the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Although the KGB was dismantled nearly two decades ago, the fear and distrust of the security services remains. As the domestic successor to the KGB, the Federal Security Service (FSB) has been accused of harassing critics, assassinating journalists, extorting bribes, and conducting pervasive surveillance. This has created a society that is inherently suspicious of the motives of any political official with a background in the security services. These motives are generally seen as instilled in the siloviki from their training and service in the security forces.

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Robert Coalson, current editor at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and former editor of The Moscow Times, claims that due to their shared experiences in the security services the siloviki are united by, and remain loyal to, the “chekist ideology.” This “chekist” culture emphasizes the need to defend Russia against a multitude of enemies, foreign and domestic. This “tinge of paranoia” not only encourages the siloviki to seek the preservation of strong, pervasive security forces analogous to the KGB, but also influences their views on foreign and domestic policy. Moreover, the siloviki view journalists and political activists as domestic dissidents, and therefore threatening to the stability of the state. It is seen as legitimately necessary to punish and remove them. This mindset of having to constantly be on guard against threats, shifts the ethical boundaries of what is morally permissible into the “ends justify the means” region. The siloviki feel they know how to protect Russia and make it great again; consequently any action they take is justified for this greater good.  

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, Russian investigative journalists and columnists for Novaya Gazeta and The Moscow Times, assert that the “ends justifying the means” mentality has gone far beyond beating up dissidents. They argue that not only did Putin bring many top FSB officers up with him when he came to power, but has also used them and the security services to encourage a culture of fear and eliminate opposition. During Putin’s presidential tenure, human rights organizations and environmental activists were banned or imprisoned on accusations of spreading dissent or spying for foreign powers. Moreover, the FSB has been used by the executive to spearhead the forced nationalization of many of the most profitable


industries, and has enforced a culture of corruption that has enriched many political officials across the government and officers in the security services. This culture is a legacy of the KGB-era that put these men above the law, and has slowed or even reversed any progress towards real democracy in Russia.\textsuperscript{10}

In 2009 Andrei Illarionov, former economic advisor to Putin, asserted that the siloviki still had a tight grip on power. The danger from having such officials in charge stems from the training they received that gave them the skills, motivation and mental attitude necessary to use force on other people. This mindset may incline these individuals towards authoritarianism. The result has been the “hard authoritarianism” you see in Russia today. The state is firmly established and looks to further consolidate its hold on power by cutting civil liberties, eliminating political rights, limiting personal freedoms, and is willing to use violence if necessary to preserve its power. This is made worse by the lack of accountability. The siloviki have a monopoly on the use of force, but are not held accountable by any higher authority, because they \textit{are} the highest authority.\textsuperscript{11}

Bettina Renz, lecturer in international security at the University of Nottingham, disagrees with the notion that Putin brought his fellow siloviki into power as a conscious policy choice to increase the influence of the security forces within Russian politics and push Russia further towards authoritarianism. Instead, Renz contends that Putin appointed men he trusted would remain loyal to him. Many of the siloviki brought into power had personal connections to Putin from his past in the KGB or from his stint as deputy to Mayor Sobchak in St. Petersburg. As

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
prime minister for only a short time in 1999, Putin was unable to build a power base to bring
with him upon assuming the presidency, so he went back and found those from the past he knew
he could trust. Moreover, he did not select exclusively from those with a security background, he
also brought several trusted economists and lawyers from his time in St. Petersburg, a group that
has become known as the “St. Petersburg liberals”. To avoid becoming dependent on any one
group, Putin skillfully played these groups off each other and maintained a balance of power
within his administration.12

Renz also disagrees with attempts to treat the siloviki as a homogenous entity. While they
do share a common background in security, the views and perceptions held by the 10 different
force structures likely differ considerably. Moreover, there is an even more defined line between
the siloviki of the military and the siloviki who performed civilian duties in the intelligence
agencies, such as Putin. Furthermore, after leaving the force structures, each silovik would have
had to adapt to the compromise and negotiation necessary in civilian bureaucracy, an
environment considerably different than the rigid hierarchy of the security services. The siloviki
have taken key posts across a broad range of agencies, further diversifying their experience and
perceptions. All of these factors would lead these individuals to adopt a wide array of opinions,
significantly degrading any homogeneity that might have existed while serving in the security
services. Renz is not arguing that Russia isn’t becoming more authoritarian, only that appointing
large numbers of siloviki across the government wasn’t part of a master plan on the part of the
Putin administration to curb democracy in Russia.13

12 Renz, Bettina. "Putin’s Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of Siloviki in Contemporary Russian
13 Ibid.
Renz also argues that we do not see significant cooperation across civilian agencies that would reflect a heavy siloviki presence intent on “coordinating a siloviki project” across the government that some critics have suggested. Instead, groups and institutions within the bureaucracy are played off against one another by the administration to keep a balance of power. Moreover, there was a significant push by the Putin administration to appoint trusted economists and lawyers, largely from St. Petersburg, to key positions. Again, this was part of a strategy to maintain a balance of power within the bureaucracy and keep the administration from having to rely on any one group.\(^\text{14}\)

Ian Bremmer, President of the global political risk consulting firm Eurasia Group, and Samuel Charap, Director for Russia and Eurasia at the think tank American Progress, take an opposite view of the siloviki as a group. They argue that it is not their past which defines them as a group, but their current interests and views. They point out that several individuals who are considered members of the siloviki faction have no background in the security services, yet are influential in group decision-making. They are united by a common goal of restoring Russia’s international prestige and power, and see economic nationalism as the best means to achieve this. Their presence in some of the most powerful positions in Russia has allowed them to carry out the nationalization of several key industries, and personally enrich themselves in the process. However, squabbles have emerged between members over the financial spoils of these takeovers and created rifts between siloviki leaders and their respective followers within the group. This conflict has threatened to overcome their perceived common goals.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 906, 907, 922
\(^\text{15}\) Bremmer and Charap. “The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia”
The Rise of Authoritarianism

Although there is disagreement on who exactly is responsible for Russia’s increasing move towards authoritarianism, there is a strong consensus that it is happening. Freedom House’s rating on Russia dropped from “partly free” to “not free” in the 2005 edition, with its political rights score dropping from a 5 to a 6 from 2002-2010, and its civil liberties score staying steady at a 5.\textsuperscript{16} To illustrate the continuing downward trend further I have compiled a chart of Russia’s ratings within The Economist’s Democracy Index from 2007-2010. Russia has dropped in these rankings from 102\textsuperscript{nd} in the world to 107\textsuperscript{th}. It has been classified within the “hybrid regime” segment, which is below the “flawed democracies” and “full democracies” but above pure “authoritarian regimes”. It is currently accompanied by Sierra Leone, Haiti and Iraq.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Russia’s Democracy Index 2007-2010}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Overall Score</th>
<th>Electoral Process</th>
<th>Functioning of Government</th>
<th>Political Participation</th>
<th>Political Culture</th>
<th>Civil Liberties</th>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3.21</td>
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<td>2.86</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit 2007-2010

\textsuperscript{16} Freedom House’s political rights and civil liberties scores are given on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free.


<http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/democracy_index_2007_v3.pdf>,
<http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf>,
From Yeltsin to Putin

The current political environment in Russia today is a direct descendant of the reforms that the Putin administration instigated in his first term in an effort to bring stability and authority back to a country reeling from a financial crash in 1998 and indecisive leadership. The transition from Yeltsin to Putin drastically changed the balance of power within Russian politics, neutralizing the ruling elite of Yeltsin’s “Family” and the omnipotent oligarchs, who dominated politics during the 1990s, and brought the siloviki into the Kremlin to assist the Putin administration’s push to centralize authority. The transition from Putin to Medvedev has been much less dramatic, as both administrations appear to share similar views on proper governance.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian economy underwent what has been described as “shock therapy” to drastically reform the command economy into a free-market economy in a short amount of time. This transition was rocky and the results were initially not promising. From 1990 to 1995 official Russian economic statistics show the GDP dropping by around 50 percent, an enormous fall that far surpassed the decline experienced by the U.S. in the Great Depression. Stability began to return by 1996, but inflationary pressures continued to mount. A crisis emerged in 1998 as Russia couldn’t find the money to pay the interest on state loan bonds and was forced to devalue its currency and declare bankruptcy. Banks began to fail, and inflation spiked to 84 percent. The economy started to recover from 1999-2000 as world energy prices began to rise, bringing much needed revenue into energy-rich

Russia. This period was extremely tumultuous for Russian society, and the country emerged from the decade weary of change, disillusioned by the instability brought on by rapid economic liberalization and political democratization, and uncertain of what lay ahead. Russians wanted stability and calm, even if that meant impinging on their civil liberties.²⁰

Political decision-making during this period operated within a unique “Russian System” that was a product of the politics and bureaucracy of the Soviet Union. This system is based on paternalism, the domination of the individual by the state, and centralized power in a leader considered above the law. This system has governed Russia in some form since the rule of the tsars.²¹ Although significant steps were made towards democracy in the early 1990s, the privileged elite from the Soviet-era immediately sought to maintain and expand their wealth and power. The massive spate of privatization brought on by the shock-therapy approach to market reform allowed a small number of political insiders to use their Soviet influence and connections to acquire enormous amounts of valuable state industry and property virtually overnight. These privileged few would become the extremely wealthy class of elites known as the oligarchs, many of whom would later prove influential in bringing Putin to power.

As the tumult began to stabilize towards the end of Yeltsin’s second term, it became clear to him and the ruling elite that a successor needed to be found who would preserve the status quo. The inner circle of elites, Yeltsin’s “Family,” was composed of some actual kin such as his daughter Tatyana Dyachenko, and other close advisers such as his chief of staff Alexander Voloshin, and oligarch Boris Berezovksy. The main concern for Yeltsin and the “Family” was

²¹Ibid., 16
finding a successor who could guarantee their safety after the transition by granting them
immunity from prosecution, and allow the oligarchs to maintain their stranglehold on the
economy. Potential candidates for successor were vetted for loyalty in 1999 through appointment
to the post of prime minister.\textsuperscript{22}

Yevgeny Primakov, former director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), was the
first selected in 1999 and soon became quite popular and was a frontrunner for the 2000
presidential race. He also instigated an investigation into organizations with close ties to the
Yeltsin “Family.”\textsuperscript{23} Yeltsin forced him to resign and looked again for someone who would have
to rely on him and his entourage to gain the presidency. Following Primakov, Sergei Stepashin
was appointed, a former director of the Federal Counterintelligence Service (predecessor to the
current FSB). However, he too attempted to assert his independence from the Kremlin and was
forced out within three months. Finally, Putin was selected, a former director of the FSB, and a
virtual political nobody at the time who was immediately discounted by many as a potential
presidential successor.\textsuperscript{24}

Putin was chosen because he had the qualities Yeltsin and his coterie were looking for.
He had proven his loyalty and allegiance to his former boss, Anatoly Sobchak, former mayor of
Saint Petersburg, by quitting his job immediately after Sobchak lost the 1996 gubernatorial
election. Moreover, as director of the FSB Putin had helped Sobchak secretly escape to Paris and
avoid trial on charges of corruption and abuse of power.\textsuperscript{25} Finally, as a political nobody Putin

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 17, 23.
\textsuperscript{24} Shevtsova, \textit{Putin’s Russia}, 22-30

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had no popular support, he was entirely dependent on Yeltsin and his patronage for his current position. However, he did have the support of the security services, which Yeltsin and the “Family” likely found very comforting in their quest to avoid future prosecution. 

Popular sentiment in the country was steadily losing faith in Yeltsin because of his rapidly declining health, and they sought a strong leader to bring stability to the disorder that seemed to be erupting across the country. In August 1999, Chechen separatists invaded the neighboring province of Dagestan, and in Moscow and other Russian cities several apartment buildings exploded. Chechen terrorists were immediately blamed and these events prompted an invasion of Chechnya in September 1999. The Second Chechen War began and Putin took the helm. The invasion soothed Russians’ increasing feelings of vulnerability and Putin’s popularity skyrocketed.

The coincidence of the terrorist attacks and the subsequent invasion with the presidential election the following year was not lost on critics. Accusations flew that the Kremlin had knowingly allowed the separatists to mass and invade Dagestan, and that the FSB had actually planted the explosives that destroyed the apartment complexes. All done in an effort to build popular support for an invasion of Chechnya, both to atone for the Red Army’s humiliating defeat in the first Chechen War and to help Putin’s presidential bid as a strong-armed leader.

As premier, Putin’s popularity rose quickly, buoyed by the resurgent military patriotism accompanying the war in Chechnya. Russian society had grown disillusioned by the failure of liberal democratic values to bring prosperity during the first decade of democratic rule, and

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26 Rutland, "Putin's Path to Power.,” 328
27 Shevtsova, Putin’s Russia, 36
28 Soldatov and Borogan, The New Nobility, 109-112
sought the stability and relative certainty that they felt a strong, powerful leader could bring.\textsuperscript{29}

This was a key reason that little controversy emerged from Yeltsin’s sudden early departure on December 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1999, well before the end of his term. Putin was appointed acting president until elections could be held in 2000. As desired, Putin’s first decree granted Yeltsin and his aides immunity from prosecution.\textsuperscript{30}

This strategic move allowed Putin to utilize the political might of the Kremlin to support his candidacy for the future presidential election. Oligarchs such as Berezovksy supported Putin’s campaign both financially and by pushing favorable television coverage through their media empires. There was little doubt as to the outcome of the elections in March. Despite the fact that he did not establish a political platform (when asked by a reporter he responded “I won’t tell”) Putin had broad popular support from Russian society, and from the elites who were convinced that Putin would preserve their wealth and property.\textsuperscript{31} He won the election easily and officially assumed the presidency in May of 2000.

The Putin administration came to power with an eye to reform. Given the strong influence one man can have in a super-presidential system, the massive changes that were to follow are often ascribed to Putin himself. However, executive decision-making did not rest on Putin’s initiative alone. Instead he relied on a tight-knit group of his most trusted advisors to hash out the policies that would be publicly attributed to Putin. As opposed to relying on formal institutions such as the Security Council or the State Council to advise him in his decision-

\textsuperscript{31} Shevtsova, \textit{Putin’s Russia}, 74, 413
making, Putin formed *ad-hoc* groups based on informal networks and met with them on a regular basis.  

To deal with the general foreign and domestic concerns of a non-security nature he would typically meet with the premier and deputy premiers, head and deputy heads of the Administration for Presidential Affairs (APA), ministers from several of the force ministries, and select advisors. The content of such meetings would usually be well-reported in the press. However, for more sensitive matters that would not become public he would limit meetings to the premier, head of the APA, and heads of the force structures. A final group, of which little is known either of the membership or the topics discussed, was likely composed of Putin’s personal friends with a common history in St. Petersburg and Leningrad State University.

**Eliminating the Opposition**

The first steps the Putin administration took were to eliminate strong bases of opposition and focus power on the center. The federalization that had taken place under Yeltsin was suddenly reversed, and power became more centralized, forming what has became known as the “power vertical”. Opponents to the state were eliminated and forced out, allowing Putin and his entourage to take full control of Russian politics.

Eliminating opposition required first reining in the powerful oligarchs, who had rarely followed Yeltsin’s wishes and refused to heed the will of the Kremlin under Putin. Second, control was established over the media, which had been relatively vocal in its criticisms of the

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33 Ibid.

Yeltsin administration and continued to do so with the new administration. Several journalists who voiced their opposition were intimidated, whether by being arrested and taken in for questioning, or even in some cases through violence. Russia became a dangerous place for journalists.\(^\text{35}\)

The first oligarch to be confronted was Berezovksy, the oligarch who had supported Putin’s selection as successor and was the powerful owner of the major television station Russian First. Berezovksy, who had been alarmed by Putin’s move to centralize power, had attempted to form an opposition among regional leaders, and used the network to criticize Putin’s actions. In October of 2000 Berezovksy was forced to sell his shares in Russian First to the state.\(^\text{36}\) As it became clear that Putin was cutting ties with the old elite of Yeltsin’s “Family,” Berezovksy fled Russia to avoid prosecution. He was tried in absentia, and charged with complicity to fraud and money laundering. He was later granted political asylum by the United Kingdom.\(^\text{37}\)

The next oligarch targeted was Vladimir Gusinsky, who had supported opposition to Putin in the 2000 elections. He owned NTV, the biggest independent television station in Russia, the radio station Ekho Moskvy, the *Itogi* journal, and the *Segodnya* periodical, all of which had given internationally acclaimed coverage of the war in Chechnya and were regularly critical of the Kremlin. In May 2000 Police raided the headquarters of Gusinsky’s Media-Most holding company that controlled various media outlets. Gusinsky was arrested in June and jailed for several days on embezzlement charges. He was forced to relinquish Media-Most on the basis of large debts owed to Gazprom, and he left Russia for exile in Spain. Russia has since charged him

\(^{35}\) Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, 84

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 91

with money laundering and demanded his extradition, which has been refused by both Spain and Greece.\(^{38}\)

The most prominent oligarch to be taken down was Mikhail Khordokovsky, the head of the oil conglomerate Yukos. During Putin’s first term, Khordokovsky supported several pro-democracy and opposition groups, and had significant influence in the Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament). He was arrested in October 2003, charged with fraud and tax evasion, and sentenced in May 2005 to nine years in prison. Yukos’ main assets were sold off, most being bought by the oil company Rosneft, which later merged with Gazprom, creating Russia’s largest oil company and was owned by the state. In 2010 he was found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to another six years.\(^{39}\) While these men likely engaged in shady dealings and illicit activities, other oligarchs who engaged in equally illegal activities were completely ignored by authorities because they maintained ties to the Kremlin and did not engage in political opposition.\(^{40}\) Moreover, these affairs have done strategic damage to Russia’s prosperity in the long-term as they violated property rights and the rule of law, making it more difficult to attract foreign investment and establish wealth in the long-term.\(^{41}\)

Targeting journalists critical of the government and oligarchs who challenged the state sent a clear message to the rest. It became obvious that opposing the Kremlin’s policies would

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likely spell political and economic suicide, and even endanger one’s life. Anna Politikovskaya, a journalist who had critically reported on the war in Chechnya and accused the Kremlin of being brutal and corrupt, was shot dead in October 2006, likely by a contract killer. The opposition was arrested, forced out, or cowed into submission, allowing Putin and his administration to freely exert their will upon every aspect of Russian politics, economy and society.

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Eliminating opposition required first reining in the powerful oligarchs, who had rarely followed Yeltsin’s wishes and refused to heed the will of the Kremlin under Putin. Second, control was established over the media, which had been relatively vocal in its criticisms of the Yeltsin administration and continued to do so with the new administration. Several journalists who voiced their opposition were intimidated, whether by being arrested and taken in for questioning, or even in some cases through violence. Russia became a dangerous place for journalists.

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44 Shevtsova, Putin's Russia, 84
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45 Ibid., 91
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Targeting journalists critical of the government and oligarchs who challenged the state sent a clear message to the rest. It became obvious that opposing the Kremlin’s policies would likely spell political and economic suicide, and even endanger one’s life. Anna Politikovskaya, a journalist who had critically reported on the war in Chechnya and accused the Kremlin of being brutal and corrupt, was shot dead in October 2006, likely by a contract killer. The opposition

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was arrested, forced out, or cowed into submission, allowing Putin and his administration to freely exert their will upon every aspect of Russian politics, economy and society.

*Bringing Regional Leaders to Heel*

One of Putin’s first significant political actions in office was to assert Moscow’s control over the regional leaders who had treated the 83 federal subjects that composed the Russian Federation as their own personal fiefdoms. Corruption and insubordination to Moscow among these regional leaders had been rampant under Yeltsin. By presidential decree, subjects were grouped into seven federal *okrugs* (regions), each headed by a presidential appointee, and who were designated with the task of ensuring regional laws conformed to federal laws. However, this move also created a layer of authority that would ensure the Kremlin kept its eye on the governors and presidents of each federal subject.⁵² Moreover, Putin was able to get legislation passed that allowed him to recall regional leaders who broke federal laws, and a bill that weakened the Federal Council. Each regional leader had originally had a seat in the Council, but was now replaced by a representative. The regional leaders themselves were relegated to the State Council, which had no direct legislative function.⁵³

Finally, the regional leaders were brought directly under the executive’s thumb in the political changes that followed the Beslan crisis, the seizure of a school in Beslan, North Ossetia by terrorists sympathetic to the Chechen cause and resulting in a bloodbath between the gunmen and government forces. On the pretense of strengthening security in Russia’s subjects, Putin proposed that governors no longer be popularly elected, but be nominated by the president and approved by regional assemblies. If the nomination should be rejected twice the president could

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⁵³ Ibid., 34-35
both dissolve the assembly and appoint an acting governor. The proposal was accepted, creating a system that very much resembles the Soviet appointment of first secretaries to each of its subjects, and significantly altering the Russian Federation’s federal character. As Michael Waller asserts, “Since September 2004 Russia has been federal in name only, as had been the case with the Soviet Union.”

Centralizing Power in the Executive

Russia has a deep history of strong executive leadership in the hands of one man. The centuries of tsarist rule placed one man at the head of the entire Russian Empire. Following the October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power, dictatorial rule continued in the hands of Vladimir Lenin and was dramatically enhanced in the hands of Josef Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party, which remained the dominant post until the collapse of the USSR. Despite the democratic rhetoric during Yeltsin’s administration, he did nothing to lessen executive authority during his reign. As a result Russian society has not had any meaningful democratic experience for any contemporary attempt at democratic reform to build upon. Additionally, the authoritarian tradition has built a deep respect in the Russian people for the khozyain (хозяин), a boss who can keep his house in order. Moreover, during the post-Soviet period, very few agencies in Russia have developed into strong institutions, allowing individuals in positions of power within the bureaucracy to exert a significant amount of personal influence on policy-making.

54 Ibid., 72
55 Ibid., 23-25
56 Bremmer and Charap, “The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia”, 88
The Russian constitution as established in 1993 places deep responsibility and significant power in the president’s hands. He is charged with guaranteeing the constitution and taking measures to ensure the independence and integrity of the state. It is clear that the constitution was designed to ensure that “the relationship between the president and government is not open to negotiation and adjustment according to the outcome of elections. The government is permanently the junior partner and is an extension of the presidency.” The president has broad legislative powers: the power to submit draft laws to parliament, issue decrees and directives not subject to approval by parliament, and can initiate referendums, which have been used to modify the constitution.\(^\text{57}\)

Putin took this legal basis and tradition and built upon it, creating an executive that dictates policy to the rest of government. The president has become the focal point of politics in the Russian Federation. He used his significant powers of appointment to build a network of patronage, with clients in powerful positions dependent on him. He is able to appoint, upon approval of the emasculated Federal Council, judges to the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court and the High Court of Arbitration, the members of the Security Council, the Presidential Envoys to the seven districts, and the powerful Administration of the President’s Affairs (APA). Using his power of decree he is able to extend his influence upon personnel decisions “deep into the regional structures.”\(^\text{58}\) While it can be argued that many democratic presidents have extensive appointment powers, the Russian president has the power to appoint the most powerful positions in Russian politics with little accountability due to the severely weakened legislative and judicial branches.

\(^\text{57}\) Waller, *Russian Politics Today*, 30-31
\(^\text{58}\) Ibid., 31-32.
A key component of executive power is the Administration for Presidential Affairs. It is composed of around two-thousand individuals accountable only to the president and is charged with carrying out various functions as designated by him. Armed with the authority of the president and accountable only to the president, the APA may be the most powerful institution in Russian politics.\(^5^9\) This has led many to characterize the APA as the new Politburo. The head of the APA has immense political power, likely second only to the president, and under him are the deputy heads, usually around eight. Putin traditionally remained aloof from the APA, and allowed it to take responsibility for many actions instigated by him. However, due to the powers of APA heads, they have been able to form patron-client relations of their own, building support outside of Putin’s influence and constituting a possible political threat.\(^6^0\)

Within the APA, the Presidential Envoys have created a new stratum of government between the federal and regional governments, a layer accountable only to the president. They are appointed by the president and are expected to coordinate joint social and security efforts between regional leaders and the Kremlin. They bring substantial staff and administration with them to the regions and allow greater federal influence on regional policy.\(^6^1\) When combined with the selection of governors being changed to appointment, regional governors lost their local power bases and became integrated into the “power vertical.” They were now considered “representatives of the President” instead of the local “bosses” they had been under Yeltsin.\(^6^2\)

Supporting the president in policy-making are several deliberative bodies, by far the most politically important of which is the Security Council. The Council is strictly advisory with no

\(^5^9\) Bremmer and Charap, "The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia", 87
\(^6^0\) Waller, *Russian Politics Today*, 37
\(^6^1\) Ibid.
executive role; however, it is headed by the president, giving its members direct access and influence. The Council has a secretary, supported by several deputy secretaries, and includes the prime minister, speakers of both houses, the Minister of International Affairs, head of the SVR, head of the FSB, Minister of Internal Affairs, head of the APA, the head of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the seven Presidential Envoys.  

A final key element of executive power is the “power structures”. The most important of these agencies are: the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry for Emergency Situations (EMERCOM), Ministry of Justice, the SVR, and the FSB. These agencies are directly responsible only to the president and have enjoyed a special status within Russian politics not explicitly stated within the constitution but understood. This is a consequence of being held accountable only to the president, their use by Putin in his reformation of the Russian political system and economy, and the deep-seated, historical Russian concern with security.

The Subordinate Federal Government and a Powerless Parliament

The government of the Russian Federation, which is constitutionally charged with exercising executive power, is essentially composed of the official sixteen ministries, the state-owned corporations, and a large number of agencies and organizations. It is headed by the premier and deputy premier. The government plays an important role in budgeting, ensuring public order, and implementing policy in the social sphere, but the presidential control of the power structures limits the government’s ability to influence internal security, defense, justice and foreign policy. The head of the government, the premier, is clearly subordinate to the

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63 Waller, *Russian Politics Today*, 38
64 Ibid., 40, 58
The presidency in today’s Russia for several reasons: the constitutionally defined role of the president as policy-maker and the premier as executor, the president’s power to appoint and dismiss the premier, and the premier only has the ability to propose ministerial appointments for the president to approve. This extends presidential influence deep into the government. As with many positions in Russian politics, the power of the premiership depends on its holder. The stature and informal authority brought by Putin’s deep influence and political power has made the position much more significant, albeit temporarily.

The parliament of the Russian Federation, the Federal Assembly, is composed of an upper chamber, the Federation Council, and the lower, the State Duma. They exert little influence upon policy-making in Russia as they only have a few important prerogatives: ratifying presidential nominees for director of the State Bank and the Audit Chamber, and appointing half of the Chamber’s members. The Duma constitutionally has the partial power to hold the executive to account through a vote of no confidence in the premier; however, this creates the risk of allowing the president to dissolve the Duma, ensuring that a vote of no confidence has never succeeded. Moreover, presidential influence is strong within the Assembly. The Federation Council is composed of two members from each subject, one of which is selected by the executive of that subject, who was in turn nominated by the president. Additionally, since 2003 the Duma has been dominated by the United Russia party, which has strongly supported both Putin and Medvedev. Therefore, the Federal Assembly has essentially become another extension of presidential power and merely rubber-stamps presidential proposals.\(^\text{66}\)

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 48-50  
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 113-126.
The system Yeltsin helped create and Putin reformed contains few democratic checks on presidential power.\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, because of the immense power of patronage wielded by the president, it has become a political magnet, attracting the most ambitious seeking the best jobs, giving him additional influence. It is highly unlikely that any challenge to this authority will emerge in the near future, especially given the popularity of the president and good economic performance.\textsuperscript{68} Furthermore, in December 2008, Medvedev signed into law a bill that expanded the presidential term from four years to six, to take affect for the next term.\textsuperscript{69} This will erode the accountability of the Russian president even further, allow him to build deep bases of influence, and decrease the possibility of a succession crisis for the current ruling elite.

\textit{Positions of Power}

I will look for \textit{siloviki} representation within the top positions of the administrative bodies that I have determined are important from my research. In addition to those listed above, I will also examine three additional offices that have special importance within the Russian political system. The first is the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), which has overall authority over running elections and has the power to decree regulations that have the force of law. The CEC has been used in the past to vet candidates and prevent some from running for office. Five members of the CEC are chosen by the president, and five by the Duma. The domination of the


\textsuperscript{68} Waller, \textit{Russian Politics Today}, 46

Duma by United Russia, the pro-Kremlin party, has given the president deep influence within the CEC and subsequently over elections.  

A second important office is the Procuracy branch of the judiciary. It is charged with investigating transgressions of the law and to take prosecutions before the courts. Its head, the Procurator General, is appointed by the Federation Council upon a presidential nomination. The Procuracy was very selective during the 1990s privatization process, ignoring many illegal dealings, and under Putin became a valuable ally in limiting opposition to his policies.

Third is the Audit Chamber, which has the power to audit companies in which the state has a stake. This Chamber was very useful to Putin in his quest to strengthen the state and regain as much of the enormous sums that were expatriated from Russia during the 1990s. As the oligarchs often strayed into illegal activities, such as money laundering, the Audit Chamber has been used to target several of them, most prominently Khordokovsky and Roman Abramovich, and was instrumental in bringing the TV networks and oil companies under state control. The head is nominated by the president and ratified by both houses of parliament.

In the appendix I have charted out the most significant positions of power, and Figure 1 below shows the trend of siloviki representation across the decade. There is a substantial focus on positions within the executive because, as I described above, it essentially dictates policy and is capable of implementing it itself. The legislative branch is only able to rubber-stamp executive policy, and the judiciary is merely a tool used by the presidency for its own ends. Also, the Putin administration was able to centralize power in the executive branch and eliminate the opposition

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70 Waller, Russian Politics Today, 129
71 Ibid., 100
72 Ibid., 104
fairly quickly, so the positions of power have been fairly constant throughout Putin’s presidency and into Medvedev’s, the only change has been in who occupies them. Moreover, as the chart illustrates there are a few instances of individuals holding two positions at the same time. You can also see several individuals who maintain their positions across the entire decade, or are moved from position to position, always maintaining themselves in the upper layer of Russian politics. This is illustrative of the exclusive, static and close-knit character of the ruling class.

Siloviki Representation Trend 2001-2010

As the chart illustrates, there is not an overwhelming representation of siloviki within the top positions of political power in Russia. Presently, only up to 17 of the top 49 positions examined as of March 2011 are staffed by officials with a probable background in the security services. In fact, the highest percentage of representation was never higher than 44% in 2004 and

73 There are also many cases of key political officials holding paid positions in state-owned corporations (Medvedev was at once head of the APA and chairman of Gazprom’s board of directors).
has declined since. This must also be examined keeping in mind Russia’s past. In the Soviet Union the security services were massive, and attracted some of the country’s best and brightest who sought rapid political advancement and the perks of being a ”chekist.” Naturally, 20 years since the collapse many of these men are still around and have the talents and connections to obtain top positions.

Although the siloviki may not have had control over a large percentage of top positions in Russian politics over the past decade, it cannot be argued that they didn’t wield considerable influence. Always with at least 30% of the most powerful positions in Russian politics (at one point nearly half), and strong representation in the key ministries and agencies, the siloviki have been in a strong position to exert significant sway on Russian decision-making. Nonetheless, although the siloviki were and still are extremely influential, they could not have single-handedly pushed Russia down the path to authoritarianism given that over half of the top positions have been occupied by individuals without a background in the security services. What does seem to be the case is a general consensus among the ruling elite on the need for centralized power, and an ability to exclude anyone who doesn’t toe the line.

**Elite Decision-Making in Russia**

**Inter-Factional Politics**

Bargaining along party lines as we see in the US does not exist in Russia due to United Russia’s firm control of the Federal Assembly over the past decade, and the inherent weakness of the Assembly following the Putin administration’s reforms. Moreover, within the executive where the real decision-making takes place, its members rarely identify strongly with any party. They do however tend to identify with two primary factions within the Kremlin. Bargaining
between these dominant factions is the core of policy-making in Russia. They are commonly defined as the siloviki and the liberals. Membership in each of these factions is not strictly delineated and is quite dynamic. There are allegiances that cut across the groups and a great deal of mobility both vertically and horizontally as ambition dictates. Overall, however, these factions define the dominant philosophies that guide decision-making in the Kremlin.

Across the factions there appears to be a general agreement that Russia functions best with a “power vertical” of executive authority, with the president at the top of a hierarchical pyramid, with direct authority and influence over every aspect of Russian politics. They feel that if left to the unpredictability of democracy, the country would fall back into the chaos of the 1990s. Therefore, an autocracy ruled by a select few is the most efficient and effective way to guide Russia to prosperity. However, the factions do not completely agree on how to manage the economy.

The liberals share a common approach to economic policy that is considerably more interventionist than Western liberalism, but is relatively more market-friendly than the siloviki. This group is generally composed of individuals with backgrounds in economics, business or law, and many come from Putin’s hometown of St. Petersburg. The liberals have gained a significant amount of influence and power with the accession of the preeminent liberal Medvedev to the presidency, and through control of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. The chairmanship of Gazprom had previously been held by Medvedev and is now held by fellow liberal and First Deputy Premier Viktor Zubkov. This faction has generally sought to carry out significant structural reform of Russia’s major economic sectors in order to attract investment,

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74 Kryshtanovskaya and White, "Inside the Putin Court", 1069
75 Ibid., 1071-72
build efficiency, and eliminate waste and poor management. They have embraced nationalization that follows the rule of law, but object to the unlawful and arbitrary nationalization that characterized much of Putin’s tenure because it damages investor confidence. Moreover, they worry that the siloviki, many with no business education or experience, cannot be trusted to manage the economy effectively. The plans of the liberals have been hampered by falling revenues caused by the global recession, and by opposition within the siloviki, many of whom benefit enormously from the current system. Within the Kremlin the siloviki likely held the upper hand during the Putin administration, but the balance may be shifting under Medvedev.76

As illustrated, the siloviki do hold several key positions of power. Igor Sechin is deputy premier; Rashid Nurgaliyev is Minister of Internal Affairs; and Nikolai Patrushev is Secretary of the Security Council. Among them there is a strict hierarchy of power, with the core enjoying direct access to Putin and the most control over resources. Secondary members are spread out across the Russian public and private spheres. Many of these secondary members managed to secure themselves top positions in 2004 by proving their worth in the Yukos affair of 2003.77 Possible siloviki representation reached nearly half of the top positions the following year.

The siloviki have pushed for the nationalization of key industries in an overall drive to create a strong centralized state, supported by well-financed security and defense industries. Therefore, key resources such as energy and natural gas must be under the control of the state, not only to provide the state with revenue but to also prevent them from falling into the hands of foreign adversaries. This statist mindset sees order and stability as the highest priority, and

76 Bremmer and Charap, “The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia”, 85-86
77 Bremmer and Charap “The Siloviki in Putin’s Russia”, 86
subsequently gives the protectors of the state, the members of the force ministries, a special status within the law. Additionally, many siloviki have taken a decided anti-Western stance. They still perceive the US and NATO as a threat and have pushed for a strong military to protect Russia’s sovereignty. At the source of this mindset seems to be a deep resentment of Russia’s loss of superpower status and a desire to reclaim the international respect the USSR once received. Any claim to great power status by Moscow today can only be based on the possession of nuclear weapons. By centralizing economic power and resources within the state, they want to use these funds to rebuild and modernize their conventional military strength to put them on a more equal footing with Western powers.\textsuperscript{78}

The nationalization program was not carried out by the siloviki strictly for the common good. Through their political influence, many siloviki have been able to personally enrich themselves by securing valuable positions in Gazprom and Rosneft, gaining control over major enterprises such as the military-industrial complex, exacting substantial bribes, and other forms of corruption that are common in Russia.\textsuperscript{79} However, competition over these spoils has caused conflict in the past between the group’s prominent members. This emerged publicly in 2007 after General Alexander Bulbov was arrested by the FSB. Bulbov had been the right-hand man of Viktor Cherkesov, then head of the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN). Cherkesov publicly accused the FSB and its director Nikolai Patrushev of attempting to derail a corruption investigation being carried out by the FSKN into possible FSB smuggling operations.\textsuperscript{80} In the

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 89
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 90
\textsuperscript{80} Baev, Pavel. "Infighting Among Siloviki Escalates to a "Clan War"" Eurasia Daily Monitor 4.188 (2007).
end Bulbov was charged with illegal wire-tapping, Patrushev was moved to Secretary of the Security Council, and Cherkesov was later sacked by Medvedev in 2008.

Clashes of interest within the *siloviki* over the spoils, and conflict between the factions over the proper course the Russian economy should take require a Russian president to be adept at balancing the various interests. Putin was fairly successful at staying above the fray. Despite being associated with the *siloviki* he has generally attempted to act as an arbiter between the opposing factions instead of taking sides.\(^\text{81}\) Maintaining this balance has become more difficult following the financial crisis and the global depression. Russia’s stock market dropped nearly 80% from its highest point before the crash, costing Russia’s top 10 billionaires around $150 billion in 2008. The accompanying drop in oil prices further strained state finances. Feuds emerged as the *siloviki* involved in business sought financial support packages from the state to which the liberals objected. The pressure has likely eased somewhat with the international recovery and rising oil prices bringing in more revenue across the board, but the days of extraordinary growth have not returned. Furthermore, within this conflict faint indications emerged that Medvedev is growing more willing to confront the *siloviki* in an attempt to curb their economic excesses, and even perhaps challenge his mentor and friend of over 20 years, Putin.\(^\text{82}\)

*Russia Under Medvedev*

When Medvedev easily won the 2008 election, many critics suggested that he would only be a figurehead president, with the main levers of power remaining in Putin’s hands. It seems

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\(^{82}\) Ibid.
likely that in return for allowing a liberal to take the presidency, it was understood that the personal assets the siloviki had garnered under Putin would not be touched. However, Medvedev has held positions of extensive power in the past, most notably as head of the APA, and the fact that he has maintained his position through all of the Kremlin infighting speaks to a strong will and cleverness. This has been more evident recently as it has begun to appear that he is attempting to rein in the siloviki, an action that may be reminiscent of Putin’s moves against the oligarchs during his first term.\(^{83}\)

In his first year of office Medvedev pushed an anti-corruption law through the Duma that brought new regulations on reporting the income of government officials. This directly targeted the siloviki with outside business interests. Such a law gives the Medvedev administration a weapon to target the siloviki, much as the Putin administration used the Audit Chamber and the tax police to go after the oligarchs. Moreover, also in 2008 he went on a hiring drive, appointing 1,000 new managers to fill important government positions that were recruited from across the spectrum. This move may allow him to build his own power base that will give him more independence from Putin and the siloviki.\(^{84}\)

In 2008, Medvedev faced his first serious challenge with the siloviki over the Georgian conflict. Prior to the Russian invasion, most of the upper leadership positions within the South Ossetian government were held by siloviki with strong ties to Moscow. It was quite evident that the government of South Ossetia saw that creating a conflict to obtain support from Russia


would support its goal of obtaining independence from Georgia. Medvedev had an opportunity to check the *siloviki* by refusing to support South Ossetia in a conflict that was clearly not in Russia’s interests. However, he stayed quiet and allowed the military to invade. In the end, Russia spent millions of dollars to support the invasion and millions more have been granted to the South Ossetian government, much of which seems to have been skimmed off by the *siloviki* involved.  

Medvedev has been more assertive regarding economic matters. During the financial crisis he criticized the government’s slow response, implicating Putin as premier. The Medvedev administration has also looked to leave behind the anti-Western rhetoric often used by the Putin administration through building political and business-based partnerships with Europe and the United States. He hopes these partnerships will bring in technology and investment to contribute to the liberal’s quest in modernizing Russia. Medvedev has appealed to the *siloviki* desire for building Russia’s international influence by claiming economic growth can be the basis for increased global power in the future. He has also made public promises to strengthen “democratic and civil society institutions in Russia.” However, truly executing such reform would demand bringing accountability to all of the factions, each of which currently benefit from the corruption endemic in the patrimonial system and the weakness of the rule of law, and is likely to run into fierce resistance.


Medvedev appeared to concede to the siloviki again in 2010 when he signed a bill into law that gave the FSB additional powers, allowing FSB officers to issue formal warnings to people seen as “threats to the country’s security.” Critics were alarmed by the memories of the KGB practice of dragging dissidents into Lubyanka for a “chat” and warning them they could be arrested if they didn’t change their behavior. Another apparent victory emerged for the siloviki in 2010 when Khodorkovsky was found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to another six years, extending his original release date from 2014 to 2016.\(^8\)

Back in 2008 Medvedev pledged to strengthen the rule of law in Russia in order to encourage foreign investors wary of arbitrary nationalization. He also set an ambitious goal of making Russia the world’s fifth ranked economy by 2020.\(^8\) It is currently ranked seventh, behind Germany and India.\(^8\) To bring such a transformation about would require large investments in aging, Soviet-era infrastructure. However, as state budgets are already strained, Medvedev is faced with a quandary. To bring in more income would require more nationalizations, higher corporate taxes, or limiting the export of capital. All of which would drive foreign investors away, but the system as it stands now will be difficult to sustain. Massive structural reform is badly needed, yet implementing it will be very difficult.\(^9\)

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The consequences of the arbitrary use of the law and the current political climate in Russia have led to capital flight becoming a serious problem. During the first quarter of this year Russia saw $21.3 billion in net capital outflows, which doesn’t portend well for the rest of the year. 2010 had only a total of $35.3 billion in capital flight across all four quarters, most of it in the fourth. Surprisingly, this has occurred alongside rising oil prices and a strengthening ruble, making investor confidence a likely culprit. Investors see doing business or even keeping their money in Russia as too risky.\(^9^2\) Extortion by corrupt officials has gotten to the point that many large Western multi-national firms are considering pulling out of Russia altogether. Bribes are generally not used to secure business, as in most market economies, but instead just to prevent state officials from abusing their office, by shutting down a company on trumped-up charges for example.\(^9^3\)

Frustration with the corruption has led to a growing opposition within the private sphere in Russia. Medvedev has claimed that $33 billion dollars, 3 percent of Russia’s GDP, disappears every year from government contracts. Three years ago Alexei Navalny, a lawyer and popular blogger, launched a daring website to expose the criminal dealings in the large Russian oil companies, ministries, and banks to the public. Moreover, his efforts have received significant public support and the government has taken notice. The site has drawn such attention that nearly $7 million in government contracts have been annulled after being labeled suspect by the site. Additionally, the Interior Ministry reported that the average bribe in Russia has quadrupled in


size during the Medvedev administration. This may be the result of anti-corruption efforts that
have driven the prices up, and from fears that the excess may be coming to an end so everyone is
grabbing what they can while they still can. Recently, the Constitutional Court upheld Navalny’s
request as a shareholder for paperwork documenting the state-owned, oil-transport giant
Transneft’s dealings. What may be even more remarkable is the fact that Navalny has not been
arrested or even murdered by this point, although an investigation has been launched by a local
prosecutor into Navalny’s past business dealings.\textsuperscript{94}

Medvedev himself may be putting action behind his words. In April of 2011, the
administration announced that orders are being prepared to dismiss several prominent officials
from state corporations. The list includes Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin of Rosneft, Finance
Minister Alexei Kudrin from VTB Bank, and First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov of
Russian Agricultural Bank. If carried out, this move would be significant. Sechin is considered
the leader of the \textit{siloviki} faction, and all are close associates of Putin, although Kudrin is
generally associated with the liberal faction due to his economic policies. Some analysts warn
that this could escalate into a serious conflict within Russia’s elite.\textsuperscript{95} Regardless, if successful
this move may be a sign of a Medvedev who is looking to assert his independence of Putin and
the \textit{siloviki}, and possibly bring significant reform to Russia.

The prospects of the Medvedev administration’s modernization program may depend
heavily on the outcome of the presidential elections in 2012. Per the new election laws passed in


\textsuperscript{95} Meyer, Henry, and Ilya Arkhipov. "Medvedev’s Plan to Oust Putin Allies Tests Limits of Power." \textit{Bloomberg.com}.
2008, the winner will remain in the presidency at least until 2018. Currently, it appears that Putin and Medvedev have not come to an agreement on who will run. Earlier assessments that Medvedev was only a gracious place-holder so that Putin could constitutionally run again in 2012 appear to be mistaken. Putin has only said that eventually he and Medvedev would “sit down and come to an agreement.” Both have made public indications that each could be a potential candidate. If indeed real conflict emerges between the two men and their respective factions, the force ministries loyalty to Putin may prove decisive. However, Medvedev stated in 2005 that Russia could “disappear as a state” if severe disagreements emerged within the elite, and no side wants it to get to that point.

Selecting Medvedev to run in 2012 would be the most rational choice for both factions. For Putin and the siloviki, passing over Medvedev would implicitly recognize that Putin had not made a good choice in selecting him as his successor. Moreover, bringing Putin back into the presidency would humiliate the liberals and would deepen the rift between the two factions. Finally, the elite factions share a deep fear of the democratic uprisings that spread across Russia’s periphery through the “color revolutions” of the past decade. They are likely wary of any action that may breed serious instability that could trigger a domestic uprising. Medvedev’s

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97 Kryshtanovskaya and White. "Inside the Putin Court", 1071-72

candidacy has been further improved by rising popularity numbers in the polls. By late 2010 he had reached a 76% approval rating, only one point lower than Putin’s 77%.  

**Conclusions**

While the *siloviki* have certainly contributed towards Russia’s autocratic trend, it does not appear that Russia is currently ruled entirely by a “militocracy” staffed with men from the security services. During the Putin administration, this description may have been more accurate, but the power of the liberals under Medvedev cannot be ignored. Still, the siloviki do have significant representation in many key positions of power. We have seen the results of their influence: increasing nationalization of strategic enterprises and the reassertion of state control over natural resources, the centralization of political power within the executive at the expense of parliamentary and judicial power, and the suppression of dissenting opinion and opposition. Moreover, their privileged position has been used to personally enrich themselves through corruption and control of state corporations. However, they have not been alone in their push towards autocracy. The majority of Russia’s elite favors centralizing authority and postponing real democratic reform into the distant future, if ever.

Over the two decades since the collapse of the USSR, the ruling Russian elite have taken advantage of a unique set of circumstances that has allowed authoritarianism to grow in Russia. Putin has enjoyed strong popular support from Russian society, despite restricting civil liberties, because it was fed up with the instability, poverty and corruption that characterized the initial attempt at democracy during the 1990s, and has appreciated the rising incomes courtesy of high energy prices in the past decade. They also enjoyed watching many of the hated oligarchs get

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stripped of much of their power and wealth. Even if they were replaced by an equally corrupt new set of elites, the “new nobility” has not been quite as boisterous and extravagant as the oligarchs were. Moreover, the 1993 constitution established a political system with a very strong executive and a weak legislative and judicial branch unable to counter-balance the president.

The inherent power of the presidency and the weakness of the rule of law have allowed the executive to expand its authority beyond the initial constitutional limits, and deeply involve itself in the private sphere. The prevalence and influence of the state corporations has greatly blurred the line that typically divides the public and private spheres in well-functioning democracies. Furthermore, because of the weakness of democratic institutions in Russia, those in power have no incentive to change. There is weak political competition, an election system heavily influenced by the executive and feeble political opposition. Essentially, there is little to hold the rulers accountable. Both Medvedev and Putin have enjoyed broad popular support, it remains to be seen if they would be responsive to a substantial drop in approval ratings. Until there is a large societal push to instigate true change, democratic reform would have to be initiated from the top, which appears unlikely.

The liberals may object to the siloviki’s arbitrary use of the law, but they have no desire to devolve power to the Russian people and lose the privileges they too have garnered. Both factions feel they alone know how to guide Russia back to prosperity. The siloviki prefer a more Soviet approach of strengthening Russia’s military and security services through the control of key industries, and preventing foreign powers from gaining any leverage through globalization. The liberals seek to bring Russia into the 21st century through a massive modernization program,
instituting the rule of law, and eliminating waste and corruption to attract foreign investment and spur economic growth.

Some argue that the rise of authoritarianism in Russia has had a positive result. Russian politics were much more democratic during the Yeltsin years, but the economy was in shambles. The reforms enacted by the Putin administration appear to have had dramatic results. The UN’s Human Development Index for Russia has risen from .662 at the start of Putin’s term in 2000 to .719 in 2010, putting it more on average with the European and Central Asian average. Russia’s GDP over tripped from $620.3 billion in 2000 to $2.229 trillion in 2010. It is inarguable that Russia is better off today economically than it was before Putin came to power. However, the economic stability appears to have come at a cost to personal freedoms for the Russian people. An inner member of Putin’s circle claimed in 2006 that the Kremlin’s strategy was to bring democracy in the long term, but “you must have stability before you can implement democratic values.” It is certainly debatable whether or not this tradeoff was necessary, and if the elite are truly committed to democracy. Moreover, with autocratic institutions becoming deeply embedded into the Russian political system, implementing democracy will be very difficult.

Russia’s energy dominance has required regional partners dependent on Russian energy to yield to Moscow’s influence in many cases, and large amounts of energy wealth have been invested in beautifying Moscow and St. Petersburg, wowing tourists and giving many Russians a


102 Ticktin, "The Inherent Instability of the Ruling Elite", 64
new sense of pride. The ruling elite however, lack a commitment to a viable long-term strategy to bring real growth to Russia not exclusively dependent on high oil prices. The anti-globalization mindset of the siloviki will be self-defeating as prosperity continues to become more and more dependent on integration with the rest of the world economy.\textsuperscript{103} The lack of transparency, mismanagement, and endemic corruption within Russian business has prevented it from reaching its potential and become competitive with the West.\textsuperscript{104} The reforms promised by the Medvedev administration may go some way to tackling these problems, but it remains to be seen if they will succeed in enacting them over opposition.

The conflict between the ruling factions that has threatened to tear the Kremlin apart illustrates a key weakness of the Russian system. Few institutions in Russia are capable of operating without direction from the center, and if decision-making becomes stalled or conflicted due to elite squabbles, it will have national implications. Moreover, the depth to which these factions penetrate across Russian politics and business could lead to inter-factional conflict spreading far beyond the walls of the Kremlin. There appears to be little hope however for any voluntary devolution of power through decentralization, as the ruling elite are inherently wary of possible competitors building power bases outside of their control and becoming a political threat in the future.

The common threat of democracy will likely keep rival elites from allowing disagreement to escalate too far. Maintaining stability has been helped by the ability of each faction to keep its hands in the cookie jar. However, the nationalization trend seems to have slowed, leaving fewer

spoils to keep everyone content. Furthermore, the rapid growth that Russia experienced under Putin was fueled by a unique combination of soaring energy prices and a depressed economy from the 1990s with strong growth potential. The global recession hit Russia very hard, and although it has begun recovering with the rise in oil prices, it is not nearly at the level it was before. These leaner times may be at the source of rising tension between the factions, and it may get worse if the liberals are able to enact their modernization program, which will demand extensive government expenditures, and can strengthen the rule of law, preventing the siloviki from taking what they please.

What we can expect to see in Russia for the next decade may rest heavily on the presidential election of 2012, or rather who is selected to run between Medvedev and Putin. The winner will be at the helm until 2018 and undoubtedly will have a strong influence over the path Russia takes. The rational choice for both factions seems to be Medvedev. However, it remains to be seen if all of the siloviki are willing to accept the changes that will be likely to come with another term, changes that will likely conflict with many of their perceived interests. We may see the more moderate siloviki go along, and the hardliners refuse. Given their control over the security forces, this could cause serious problems. Ultimately it will come down to a decision between making sacrifices to allow Russia to engage in a sorely needed modernization program in the interests of future prosperity, or rejecting them in favor of maintaining their own personal wealth.

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## Appendix

### Siloviki Representation 2001-2011

Blue=Confirmed Security Ties  
Yellow=Alleged Security Ties  
Green=No Known Security Ties

### 2001-2003

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2010-Present
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