

The Siloviki in Russian Politics

Andrei Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz

Who holds power and makes political decisions in contemporary Russia? A brief survey of available literature in any well-stocked bookshop in the US or Europe will quickly lead one to the answer: Putin and the “siloviki” (see e.g. LeVine 2009; Soldatov and Borogan 2010; Harding 2011; Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky 2012; Lucas 2012, 2014 or Dawisha 2014). *Sila* in Russian means force, and the siloviki are the members of Russia’s so called “force ministries”—those state agencies that are authorized to use violence to respond to threats to national security.

These armed agents are often portrayed—by journalists and scholars alike—as Russia’s true rulers. A conventional wisdom has emerged about their rise to dominance, which goes roughly as follows. After taking office in 2000, Putin reconsolidated the security services and then gradually placed his former associates from the KGB and FSB in key positions across the country (Petrov 2002; Kryshchanovskaya and White 2003, 2009). Over the years, this group managed to disable almost all competing sources of power and control. United by a common identity, a shared worldview, and a deep personal loyalty to Putin, the siloviki constitute a cohesive corporation, which has entrenched itself at the heart of Russian politics. Accountable to no one but the president himself, they are the driving force behind increasingly authoritarian policies at home (Illarionov 2009; Roxburgh 2013; Kasparov 2015), an aggressive foreign policy (Lucas 2014), and high levels of state predation and corruption (Dawisha 2014).

While this interpretation contains elements of truth, we argue that it provides only a partial and sometimes misleading and exaggerated picture of the siloviki’s actual role. Based

on interviews we conducted with former siloviki, experts on the force ministries, and lawyers and social activists whose work focuses on them, as well as a comprehensive review of written sources and analysis of our own quantitative data, we suggest a different account.

Rather than a coordinated takeover of state institutions, we view the siloviki's ascendance as a result of Putin's reliance—in a highly personalized system—on his own particular network of trusted friends and colleagues. Where others see a cohesive corporation, we see a mosaic of clans and factions that are too divided and lacking in common leadership to advance any collective agenda. What they can do is to compete against each other for budget allocations and corrupt rents, exploiting their freedom from accountability. Although their fragmentation makes it hard to see the siloviki as the driver behind Russia's current policies—domestic and international—they do share a common worldview that is very much aligned with these policies. It is Putin's increasing acceptance of this vision of reality, and his dependence on a few trusted individuals from this world, rather than any institutionalized position or role of the security services, that explains his recent adoption of priorities that have for years been popular in the Lubyanka building.

Russia's force ministries: from Soviet times to Putin

In the broadest sense, Russia's force ministries comprise: the armed forces; the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), which until recently had its own internal troops (these were transferred into a new "National Guard" in the spring of 2016); the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS), which has its own civil defense troops; the General Procuracy; the Investigative Committee; and the security services—which will be our main focus here (see Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume, for discussion of the MVD, and Procuracy). This landscape has evolved since the end of communist rule in 1991.

Under the Soviet Union, the security and intelligence community was defined by the rivalries and turf wars between two major players, the Committee of State Security, the KGB, and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, the GRU. While the KGB was responsible for foreign intelligence, counterintelligence and internal security, the GRU focused primarily on military intelligence abroad. Both organizations, the secret police and military intelligence, were essentially part of the large apparatus of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which scrutinized and controlled them quite effectively. Under the 1959 KGB Guidelines, every party member had the right “to report about shortcomings in the work of the organs of state security to the respective party organs.” Each division, department, and office of the KGB had a party cell, a peephole by which the state could monitor its agents. All promotions had to be approved by the Party Central Committee’s Administrative Department, which relied on the information gathered by the party cells. This same department also vetted all military intelligence officers of the GRU before they were sent abroad.

In August 1991, as Gorbachev’s close associates attempted a coup to salvage the Soviet regime, Vladimir Kryuchkov, the KGB head, was among the operation’s leaders. By contrast, Vladlen Mikhailov, the GRU director, kept his agency on the sidelines. For this reason, the new, democratically elected Russian authorities led by Boris Yeltsin distrusted the KGB and sought to reform it, while remaining relatively unconcerned about the GRU. As a result, the GRU survived the transition practically untouched. The director was replaced, but the structure and even the name of the organization remained the same.

Although the KGB was expected to undergo substantial reform, it experienced only a simple restructuring. Yeltsin’s plan was to break the agency up and delineate the responsibilities of each piece. The largest department—initially called the Ministry of Security, then the Federal Service of Counter-Intelligence (FSK), and finally the Federal

Security Service (FSB) — was put in charge of counterespionage and counterterrorism, with its political section that had tracked and harassed dissidents disbanded; it was also initially stripped of its investigative powers and prisons. But it was this department that inherited the KGB's network of regional branches. The former foreign intelligence directorate was renamed the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), while the division responsible for electronic eavesdropping, cryptography and secure government communications became the Committee of Government Communication, later called the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI). A KGB directorate that guarded secret underground facilities was simply renamed the Main Directorate of Special Programs of the President, or GUSP, and the branch that had provided bodyguards for Soviet leaders was renamed the Federal Protective Service. Finally, the Soviet border guards became an independent Federal Border Service.

During the initial economic and political transition of the early 1990s, the Russian security services went through an unprecedented era of openness. Its officers welcomed human rights activists searching for files on victims of repression under Stalin into the archives. KGB generals became guests on TV shows, and the agency's leaders invited dissidents to visit its headquarters in Moscow's Lubyanka Square. Concerned to avoid the fate of the East German Stasi, the KGB proposed involving prominent political activists in the reform of the agency. Sergey Grigoryants, a famous Soviet dissident who had spent nine years in jail, was invited to join the agency's supervisory committee. He refused, fearing that his name would be exploited. The supervisory committee never produced a reform plan.

Ultimately, Yeltsin's governments failed to create a system of parliamentary oversight over the security services. In a decree issued on December 21, 1993, Yeltsin himself admitted that "the system of the VChK [Cheka]-OGPU-NKVD-MGB-KGB-MB has proved unreformable. The attempts at reorganization that have been made in recent years were

basically superficial and cosmetic.... The system of political investigation has been mothballed and could easily be recreated.” (Waller 2004, page 349; see also Knight 1994, page 22). Beneath the surface reorganization, the internal mechanisms and machinery remained largely intact. Bureaucratic procedures, information collection and dissemination, and the rules for approving operations all remained the same, as well as the names of most operating units.

Attempts to strengthen accountability were undercut by the security services’ control of the necessary information and their assertion of secrecy. In one case, pressure from dissidents and journalists persuaded Andrei Bykov, the agency’s deputy director in 1992-96, to require some outside body to approve surveillance operations—initially the prosecutor’s office, but from 1995 the courts. Yet the fine print of the regulation made it largely irrelevant. While the FSB officer had in theory to get a warrant, he was not allowed to show it to the telephone operator for reasons of secrecy. The FSB also had all the necessary equipment to directly tap into telephone conversations by itself, so that in actual practice no one could challenge surveillance orders.

Authority to oversee the FSB and GRU passed from the old CP Central Committee Administrative Department to a directorate within the Presidential Administration. Yet, lacking the kind of tips and inside information that the communist supervisors had obtained from their party cells inside the security agencies, the new body was operating in the dark, without any real power to control the FSB, GRU and other security agencies.

To this day, the widely used “Official Secrets Act of the Russian Federation” (*Zakon o Gosudarstvennoi Taine*) makes it impossible in practice for any independent actor to investigate the dealings of the force ministries. Under the Act, the ministries can classify any relevant information as a state secret. Although all security services created special bodies, the

so-called Internal Security Directorates, to combat corruption, in fact these bodies were used to protect the reputation of the services. It soon became established practice for police investigators, on discovering employees of the security services complicit in criminal activity, to hand over this part of the investigation to the internal security directorate of the relevant service, which usually shut the case down. In theory, some external control could also have come from the General Procurator's Office, a special body responsible for overseeing all law enforcement agencies including the FSB. Yet, a law regulating FSB activities rendered this toothless by stipulating that: "Information regarding people who provide or have provided FSB organs with confidential assistance regarding the organization, tactics, methods, and means of implementing the activity of FSB organs shall not be subject to oversight by the procurator's office."¹

Rather than supervising the security services' activities, the parliament has often increased their discretion. The State Duma frequently delegates legislative initiatives on security and intelligence to the concerned agencies and then rubber stamps the drafts these agencies propose. Both chambers of the parliament have a committee to deal with the security budget, but it is unclear whether they have ever done more than merely approve the agencies' proposal.

In place of institutionalized oversight of the security services, Yeltsin sought to control them by encouraging inter-agency rivalries. In the 1990s, the foreign intelligence agency remained in direct competition with military intelligence, while the FSB struggled against the communications agency, which also kept a close eye on the social and political situation in Russia. After obtaining a report from the FSB director, Yeltsin could compare it with the report from the FAPSI director. FAPSI was particularly crucial, as it controlled the central

¹ In April 2002, a further decree required that FSB "work-related documents" were to be treated as classified and could, as a rule, only be examined by the prosecutors on the FSB premises. Only in exceptional cases was the Prosecutor's office allowed to demand access to such documents (Soldatov and Borogan 2010).

electronic vote-counting system, which offered a sneak preview of voting outcomes in real time for the Kremlin.

Inter-service rivalry intensified when in 1993 a new agency, the Tax Police, was created to address the problem of Russia's catastrophically low tax receipts. This new body competed bitterly with the department of economic safety within the FSK and later FSB. Meanwhile, the new service charged with protecting the president was transformed by its chief, Alexander Korzhakov, a former Yeltsin bodyguard, into what many described as an updated Praetorian Guard. The agency employed parapsychologists and clairvoyants to draft prognoses and analytical reports for Yeltsin, in parallel with the reports of the communications agency and the FSB.

In short, three main features characterized the security services that President Putin inherited in 2000. First, the two super-agencies of the Soviet era—the KGB and GRU—had been replaced by a mosaic of competing services, which Yeltsin's divide-and-rule tactics had mobilized into intense mutual rivalry. Second, the somewhat effective oversight and control that the Soviet Communist Party had exercised had not been replaced by any system of democratic monitoring and accountability. A natural consequence was widespread corruption of all kinds. Third, although now distributed among multiple organizations, the functions, procedures, authority, and even many of the personnel of the security services remained the same as in the late Soviet era.

Putin's reconsolidation?

Did Putin restore organizational coherence to Russia's security space? At some points, he did seem to be consolidating agencies and strengthening the role of the FSB. In March 2003, he abolished the Tax Police. That same month, he eliminated the communications agency,

FAPSI, dividing its personnel and resources between the FSB and the Federal Protective Service. He also folded the border guards into the FSB. In addition, the FSB was permitted to create its own department for gathering foreign intelligence, directly rivalling the Foreign Intelligence Service. And it got the upper hand over the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), an agency that combines the national police with an investigations department similar to the American FBI. The FSB placed counterintelligence officers in key posts in the MVD, and in 2003 Rashid Nurgaliev, an FSB general, was appointed to head the ministry. All this made the FSB into the undisputed leader of the country's security services.

Yet there are problems with this image of Putin as the great consolidator. First, the trend towards rebuilding and re-empowering the security services predates him by several years. Indeed, the Russian secret services started to regain the influence they had lost during the fall of the Soviet Union not with Vladimir Putin, but already from 1995. The main successor of the KGB, the FSK (in which K stands for Kontrrazvedka – counterintelligence), was renamed in 1995 as the FSB, replacing “Kontrrazvedka” with the much wider term “Bezopasnost” (security). In 1995, the FSB also managed to regain its investigative department and its own system of prisons. From that time on, the FSB combined the functions of a secret service and a law enforcement agency.

During the late 1990s, Yeltsin began to rely more and more on the siloviki. All three of the prime ministers he chose during the crisis years of 1998-2000—Yevgeny Primakov, Sergei Stepashin, and finally Vladimir Putin—had security service backgrounds. Thus, Putin's advent to power was not the initial cause of the re-consolidation of Russia's security agencies, but actually a consequence of this already ongoing process.

Second, even as Putin was merging some agencies into the FSB, he was complicating the institutional environment in other ways. All the officers from the abolished Tax Police

were redeployed to fill the ranks of a new agency that Putin created to combat the narcotics trade, the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN), whose original leader, Viktor Cherkesov, was a former KGB officer from St. Petersburg and Putin's close friend. In April 2016, Putin created a new "National Guard" out of the internal troops within the Interior Ministry. In return, the Interior Ministry absorbed the antidrug agency FSKN. Despite Putin's reorganizations, the Russian intelligence and security community today consists of nine major agencies. Outside this community, Putin created another major new silovik institution, the Investigative Committee (IC), which since January 2011 has been the main federal investigative authority in Russia (see also Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume). The agency answers directly to the Russian President and is responsible for inspecting the police forces, combating police corruption and misconduct, and investigating local authorities and federal government bodies. Formed within the office of the Procurator General in 2007, and given independent status only in 2011, the IC does not date back to the KGB, and so its employees have a somewhat different mentality; for example, they are slightly more open and ready to talk to the press than their FSB colleagues. It also had relatively high internal cohesion since it was run for years by its founder, Alexander Bastrykin, who could rely on the strong personal loyalty of his top subordinates, most of whom he had appointed himself.

Competition among these many rival agencies remains intense. Yet there is little evidence that Putin uses this rivalry as Yeltsin did to obtain information and maintain control. Only on one occasion is Putin known to have used one agency to check another: in 2007, he asked the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN), still led by his friend Viktor Cherkesov, to look into the dealings of the FSB. The result was a bruising defeat for Cherkesov. His leading general in charge of the investigation was jailed, and Cherkesov himself was soon deprived of his position. In the end, the FSB proved too strong even for Putin. Rather than a technique of presidential control, inter-agency rivalry has largely degenerated into a fight for material

benefits, with every service trying to defend its rents and sphere of influence against possible encroachment.

There is only very limited evidence that Putin uses his authority as president to micro-manage security service appointments. We know of only two occasions on which Putin directly interfered with personnel decisions to fire or transfer important siloviki. When in the summer of 2004 Chechen guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev invaded Ingushetia and managed to control the republic for two days, Putin fired a group of high-ranking FSB generals. The FSB had temporarily lost control over an entire Russian region, and this was something Putin was not ready to forgive. The second example dates from 2014-16, when Putin started transferring people from the Federal Protection Service (FSO) to important positions in the federal agencies and the regions. This last example might indicate the beginning of a new trend, with the number of siloviki in key positions starting to increase again during the last three years, both at the federal center and in the regions.²

However, even as he was moving members of his personal bodyguard squad into high political and administrative posts, Putin also began to retire some of closest long-time associates with a siloviki background. In April 2016, Viktor Ivanov's antidrug agency was disbanded and he was not offered a new post; Evgeny Murov, the head of the FSO, was fired in May 2016; and, most dramatically, Putin dismissed Sergei Ivanov as head of the Presidential Administration in August 2016. Thus, although the number of siloviki in important administrative positions started to increase again from 2014, the old political

² Four examples are: Alexander Kolpakov, who became head of the Presidential Administrative Directorate in May 2014; the FSO general Dmitry Mironov, who was first appointed the new head of the Main Directorate of Economic Security and Fighting Corruption within the Interior Ministry and then in July 2016 made acting governor of Yaroslavl Oblast; Putin's former bodyguard Alexey Dyumin, who was appointed acting governor of Tula Oblast in February 2016; and another of Putin's bodyguards, Evgeny Zinichev, who was appointed acting governor of Kaliningrad Oblast in July 2016.

heavyweights—who often had their own opinions, sometimes strongly held—were giving way to lower level service professionals, who are less likely to provide independent input. This is consistent with the continuing tendency to narrow down competing or independent sources of information and limit decision-making to an ever smaller group of individuals around the president. One might also see here a rebalancing of the relative weight of the FSB and FSO.

Thus, Putin only reconsolidated the security services and interfered with personnel appointments to a limited extent. Yet, since coming to power, he has provided the services with a significant increase in resources, in both absolute and relative terms. While spending in absolute terms more than doubled between 2000 and 2007 (Taylor 2011, page 53), in relative terms the law enforcement and security services increased their share compared to military spending during Putin’s first two terms as president.

Another significant increase in financial resources available to both the military and the security services began with Russia’s extensive rearmament program, which started in 2011. As a result, the federal budget share for national defense is estimated to have grown from 14 percent of the total in 2011 to 19 percent in 2015, and it is predicted to grow to 25 percent in 2020; spending on security and law enforcement was projected to increase from 11 percent in 2011 to 13.5 percent in 2015 (Taylor 2013). By contrast, combined spending on health care and education was set to decline from 9.2 percent of the budget in 2011 to 6.2 percent by 2015 (Taylor 2013). Even though overall spending on rearmament has been readjusted in view of Russia’s recent economic crisis, the cuts have been far less significant than in other sectors of the economy (Oxenstierna 2016). This clearly illustrates the changing priorities associated with Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, pointing to a substantial relative increase in power and resources for the force ministries within the Russian government from about 2012 onwards.

Security personnel taking over the state?

A couple of days before becoming president, Putin addressed his former FSB colleagues. In a speech later cited repeatedly, he announced that: “A group of FSB operatives, dispatched under cover to work in the government of the Russian Federation, is successfully fulfilling its task.” Some observers, already inclined to see Putin as the frontman for a security service conspiracy, saw this as less a joke than a frank admission.³ Putin’s early personnel appointments seemed to confirm the impression that he was determined to re-establish the dominance of the former KGB. In a widely cited study, Kryshtanovskaya and White (2003) claimed that by 2003 a quarter of Russia’s senior bureaucrats had a background in the force ministries (up from 3.7 percent under Gorbachev in 1988).⁴

Yet, there is an alternative explanation for the growing number of siloviki in leading positions that, although somewhat less exciting, is probably closer to the truth. Rather than the result of a coordinated “siloviki project,” consciously advanced by Putin, the spread of former KGB officers is a consequence of the informal elite recruitment system that Putin inherited (Renz 2006, 2007). To survive in power, Yeltsin developed a highly personalized and tactical approach to political appointments. Taking over this system, Putin had little choice but to rely on people he knew and trusted to fill key offices. As many of those he knew, trusted, and had worked with in the past were from either St.

³ See, for example, *The Economist*, August 23rd, 2007, “Russia Under Putin: The Making of a Neo-KGB State”, <http://www.economist.com/node/9682621> (last accessed on January 29th, 2016).

⁴ In a second study, Kryshtanovskaya and White (2009) argue that this group then systematically proceeded to eliminate all alternative sources of power (regional governors, competitive elections, the media, and private business), to build a state where “all important decisions [...] are now taken by a tiny group of men who served alongside Mr Putin in the KGB and who come from his home town of St Petersburg.” Olga Kryshtanovskaya, cited in *The Economist*, August 23rd, 2007, “Russia Under Putin: The Making of a Neo-KGB State.”

Petersburg or the FSB, an increase in the number of such people at the top is not that surprising.

Some scholars have qualified the picture of siloviki dominance. Rivera and Rivera (2006, 2014) found that while the percentage of siloviki in key positions did rise significantly, after correcting for some methodological inconsistencies the real number of siloviki among the state elite was not around 25 percent but between 15 and 20 percent in 2003, and around 20 percent in 2008, with the numbers then declining again during the Medvedev presidency (Rivera and Rivera 2014, p.44). Comparing these numbers to those for other groups—for example former business people—the siloviki did not occupy an overwhelmingly prominent position, at least until Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. Based on a micro-level study of particular siloviki, Renz (2006) concluded that the policy role played by many of these individuals was also less important than generally assumed.

In sum, although the number of siloviki in key positions has clearly grown under Putin since the early 2000s, the increase is less dramatic than often thought, and it resulted more from the personalized nature of Russia’s recruitment system than from a deliberate strategy adopted by either Putin or powerful forces inside the Lubyanka building.

A united lobby for favored policies?

Do the various siloviki ministries, agencies and departments constitute a unified group that is able to coordinate its actions to press for specific policies? The organizational fragmentation already noted renders this unlikely. And institutional divisions are cross-cut and exacerbated by factional, personal, and business rivalries (Galeotti 2015, p.10). The accounts of our respondents suggest that, rather than working together to implement a common “siloviki

agenda,” these different agencies often compete fiercely, for both access to Putin and the control of corrupt income and spheres of influence.

However, the siloviki’s increasing presence in the 2000s did have one clear consequence: a visible change in the country’s political culture. They brought in the suspicious, inward looking mind-set of the security services, which had been shaped by Soviet history. This trend is best reflected by one infamous saying of Boris Gryzlov, the parliamentary speaker in 2003-2011 and a member of Putin’s inner circle (he was a schoolmate of Nikolai Patrushev, then FSB director), who, on his very first day in the State Duma, announced that: “the Parliament should not be a ground for political battles.” (The quote became known later as “parliament is no place for discussion.”)⁵

The siloviki do share an interest in the status quo, since any kind of political, institutional, or economic reform would likely limit the size of the corrupt profit streams they enjoy. The force agencies protect each other against outside interference, circling the wagons to prevent the judiciary or anyone else from launching independent investigations into their activities, one respondent told us. Yet, at the same time, they fight furiously among themselves, using “the information and coercive capacities at their disposal” as well as criminal connections to defraud and expropriate targeted businesses (Galeotti 2015, p. 9).

Another source of conflict that one of our respondents pointed out is the competition for spheres of influence. With different agencies providing protection services for bribes in carefully delimited spheres, an unexpected change in these areas can provoke intense infighting, though it rarely becomes visible to the public.⁶

⁵ The hearings in the State Duma, December 29, 2003, the transcript available <http://www.cir.ru/docs/duma/302/420464?QueryID=3739136&HighlightQuery=3739136>

Yet another source of internal division concerns age. A conflict of generations appears to be emerging, with mid-level officers finding themselves unable to obtain promotions. Putin appointed key allies from his KGB days in St. Petersburg to the FSB's top posts, and most remain in these or other top jobs today, blocking mobility for those below. Frustration has been growing among mid-level officers, leading to a deepening crisis of trust inside the agencies. In a highly unusual move, in 2008 a group of mid-ranking FSB officers appealed first to Moscow military courts and then to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, with a complaint about the excessive compensation paid to high-ranking FSB generals at a time when mid-ranking officers had difficulties obtaining the benefits to which they were entitled by law. Instead of addressing the complaints, the FSB created a department aimed at protecting high-ranking generals from such lawsuits. As an FSB colonel told us, "this department was established to protect the FSB leadership, not ordinary officers. At one meeting, generals of my section were asked why there was such a big difference in salaries. They answered that the Motherland once had no money. Now, the country has the resources and so they should be paid adequately for their work."

Besides their many divisions, a key obstacle to the siloviki presenting a policy agenda is that—apart from Putin, whose role requires him to arbitrate between them and other political forces—they have no leader. Moreover, there is no setting in which heads of the various services can meet and work out common positions. Thus, rather than a cohesive corporation with a common policy agenda, the siloviki represent a collection of competing agencies, with counterpoised interests and mutual animosities.

⁶ One exception might be the conflict opposing investigator Boris Kolesnikov from the Ministry of the Interior and some allegedly highly corrupt members of the FSB, as documented in the *New Yorker*, "Death of a Russian Cop," July 27, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/27/the-double-sting> (last accessed on January 29, 2016).

A common worldview?

Although divided in all the ways already mentioned, the siloviki do appear to share a common view of the world. At least, that is the strong impression we have formed from our recent interviews and from reporting about and studying the force ministries over the past 10 years. A good illustration of the way many siloviki think can be found, for example, in a recent interview by Security Council Head and former FSB director Nikolay Patrushev,⁷ or in the official magazine of the FSB, *Za I Protiv*.⁸ Although variation across different agencies and individuals does of course exist, we have tried to summarize the siloviki worldview in three main points.

First, the siloviki favor a strong and highly-centralized state that is supported by large and well-financed security and defense structures. This strong state should play a decisive role in the economy and make sure that the economic interests of the nation are defended against the encroachments of globalization. Second, they see Russia as menaced by external forces that envy its economic wealth, natural resources, and status as a great power. The greatest threats come from NATO and the United States. Third, the siloviki tend to see themselves as uniquely competent to understand the dangers Russia faces and to choose appropriate responses. They see the realm of official politics as one of lies and deception, which ordinary people are unable to penetrate. The heads of the security services believe “that they are the only ones who have the real picture and understanding of the world,” according to the former dissident Sergei Grigoryants.⁹ A number of our respondents confirmed this point.

⁷ <http://rg.ru/2015/12/22/patrushev-site.html>

⁸ <https://osfsb.ru/press-center/m/default.aspx>

⁹ Ibid.

Although we observed loyalty to Putin among the former siloviki we interviewed, and a reluctance to find fault with their president at a time of international conflict, there were some nuances. One respondent said that he did not agree with all of Putin's policies, especially with respect to the economy, but added that "we are now under siege, and you do not criticize the commander in chief when the fortress is under siege." Another retired silovik voiced concerns about Russia's recent intervention in Syria, doubting whether those generals and soldiers who had fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya would have been as eager as current leaders to get involved in another conflict. In his view, many of the top siloviki in Russia today never fought in a real war themselves and are therefore more inclined to send soldiers abroad than the older siloviki generation. Some, by emphasizing their professionalism and sense of responsibility to protect the country, implicitly differentiated themselves from others more focused on careerism or corrupt rents. These views reflect the concerns raised by Viktor Cherkesov in a widely cited newspaper article in 2007, where he argued that "warriors should not become merchants."¹⁰

Another common point shared by many siloviki is a close relationship to the Russian Orthodox Church. Leonid Reshetnikov, head of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, a think tank that used to be part of the foreign intelligence service SVR, framed the conflict in Ukraine in terms of a conflict between Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy: "Ukrainism (ukrainstvo) from its beginning is an anti-Orthodox concept: it was directed not only against the Russians, against the Muscovites, it was directed against Orthodoxy. This concept was born in the West, in Austria-Hungary, in Poland, in Catholic countries, and it is now being implemented."¹¹

¹⁰ *Kommersant*, October 9th, 2007, "Нельзя допустить, чтобы войны превратились в торговцев."

¹¹ In an interview given to Radio Radonezh on January 15th, 2016 (<http://riss.ru/smi/25386>). Radio Radonezh is a radio station that according to its website claims to be "the voice of the Russian Orthodox Church, in Russia and beyond its borders" (<http://radonezh.ru/gruppasmi>).

It appears that such views are shared by many members of the security services, especially among the older generation as well as among quite a number of leading generals at the very top. The relationship also goes both ways, with the Russian Orthodox Church maintaining close links with various security agencies. The Moscow Patriarchate even maintains a special department for relations with the siloviki. In a recent letter to the head of the FSB, Patriarch Kirill congratulated the siloviki on their good work.¹²

To reiterate, rather than a united group with the kind of leadership, organization, and shared interests that would make it possible to identify and lobby effectively for favored policies, the siloviki appear today to be a fragmented community of rival services, factions, and personal networks, competing among themselves for budget resources, corrupt rents, and access to Putin. They are united by little other than a general loyalty to the commander in chief and a conservative and nationalistic worldview, although there are divisions here too. This picture of fragmentation would probably be even more striking if we included a closer look at the armed forces and the police. This raises the question whether the increasingly authoritarian tendencies in Russian domestic policy and the Kremlin's more assertive international posture reflect the ascendancy of the siloviki as a group, or rather the contingent fact that the instincts and understandings of Putin and his close circle were forged over the course of long careers in the force ministries.

¹² For example, see this telegram from February 23rd, 2016, by Patriarch Kirill to Alexander Bortnikov, director of the FSB: "For many years as the head of the Federal Security Service, you always aspire to be an example of professionalism and fidelity to your vocation and the readiness to work selflessly for the good of Russia, performing one of the most important tasks to protect the country from external and internal threats." (<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4383916.html>).

Explaining the authoritarian turn

At first glance, what happened in Russia during the last four years seems to come close to realizing what many researchers would characterize as a “siloviki agenda” (see e.g. Bremmer and Charap 2006, or Staun 2007), namely a “tightening of screws” for the political opposition at home and an increasingly aggressive foreign policy abroad. One might take this as a sign of the siloviki’s final victory in the bureaucratic struggle against all other powerful actors. Yet there are problems with this view.

Most importantly, it does not explain the timing of the change. It appears that Putin’s greater reliance on the siloviki and adoption of their agenda was a reaction to events rather than the result of any lobbying or prior bureaucratic strengthening of the force ministries. Indeed, Rivera and Rivera (2014) argue that the share of siloviki in top positions declined during the Medvedev presidency. A recent increase of siloviki in leading positions both at the federal level and in the regions only occurred after the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Similarly, although Russia’s extensive rearmament campaign was initiated in 2011, the fact that defense and security-related spending was reduced much less than spending on other sectors of the economy during the recent economic crisis was due to the perception of new risks and threats, rather than a result of successful lobbying by the force ministries (Oxenstierna 2016).

Two key events had a major impact on the change of the direction of Russian domestic policy after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012—the Arab Spring in early 2011 and then the mass protests that broke out in Moscow after Russia’s parliamentary and presidential elections in December 2011 and March 2012. Even more than during the mid-2000s, when a series of “color revolutions” toppled a number of regimes in the post-Soviet world, Russia’s elites during and after Putin’s return to the presidency were frightened by the prospects of increased social unrest and the spectre of potentially violent regime change (see below).

On February 22, 2011, Dmitry Medvedev, then the Russian president, urgently convened a meeting of the National Antiterrorism Committee, which consisted of leaders of the security and law enforcement agencies. Medvedev chaired the event and in his opening remarks soon turned to the Arab Spring: “Look at the current situation in the Middle East and the Arab world. It is extremely difficult and great problems still lie ahead,” he said. “We must face the truth. That scenario was harbored for us, and now attempts to implement it are even more likely.”¹³

These events strengthened the siloviki’s influence primarily because they seemed to confirm the narrative that siloviki leaders had been expounding for years—and to which Putin appears increasingly committed. In this narrative, the United States has been working consistently to topple political regimes on the soil of the former Soviet Union. The “color revolutions” of the early 2000s in Georgia and Ukraine are understood as part of this effort. They demonstrated not just the covert aggression of the US but also its grasp of a new technology—social networks—that could mobilize revolutionary crowds into the streets even without such traditional instruments as trade unions and opposition parties.

In the past, Putin had turned mostly to his civilian political operatives, led by Vladislav Surkov, to manage such threats. It had been Surkov who, in the mid-2000s, set up youth movements such as *Nashi* (“Ours”), to combat potential anti-regime crowds; mobilizing such pro-Putin groups was chosen as the main strategy to counter “color revolutions.” The 2011-12 Moscow protests were seen as a failure of Surkov’s team, and instead law enforcement leaders were authorized to use harsher methods. Surkov was replaced as the top Kremlin official in charge of domestic policy by Vyacheslav Volodin, who took care to coordinate with the siloviki. While Surkov was bold enough to pick a fight with the

¹³ “Transcript of the meeting of the National Antiterrorism Committee,” February 22, 2011, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1804>.

Investigative Committee,¹⁴ Volodin had no intention of challenging the force ministries, warning one regional governor: “If you get in a fight with the siloviki, don’t expect support from us.”¹⁵

The increasing reliance on the use of law enforcement was evident in the arrest of 30 protesters after a demonstration on Bolotnaya Square on May 6, 2012. Many of those arrested were detained until late 2013, and six were sentenced to prison terms of 2.5 to 4.5 years. Yet, the siloviki have not always seemed up to the new challenges. The vigorous propaganda campaign that the Kremlin unleashed, both on national TV (see e.g. Pomerantsev and Weiss 2015) and on the internet (Soldatov and Borogan 2015), appears to have been managed by civilians. At first, Putin had turned to the siloviki for help combatting the new dangers associated with social networks. But FSB generals complained that they had no effective techniques to address these threats (Soldatov and Borogan 2015). Besides a few new measures to filter the internet, they did not come up with much, so it was left to civilian operatives to mount the main counter-offensive. From offices in several cities, an army of publicly funded internet trolls together with some pro-Kremlin bloggers were assigned to dominate discussion forums and social networks frequented by the opposition.¹⁶

To the Kremlin, the political protests that started in Ukraine in late 2013 seemed just another Western attempt at regime change. The FSB, tasked with providing information about political developments in Ukraine since the late 1990s, utterly failed to predict the crisis. The reasons for the failure were primarily the agency’s lack of interest in grass-root mass

¹⁴ In a speech at the London School of Economics on May 1st, 2013, Surkov criticized the Investigative Committee for being too aggressive in their investigation against the innovation hub Skolkovo, the promotion of which was one of his responsibilities. The speech led to harsh criticism from the side of Vladimir Markin, press secretary of the investigative committee, and is believed to have triggered Surkov losing his post as deputy prime minister a week later (see e.g. <http://www.interpretermag.com/why-vladislav-surkov-was-fired/>).

¹⁵ http://slon.ru/russia/bastrykin_vmesto_surkova-945953.xhtml

¹⁶ *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2nd, 2015, “The Agency”, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0 (last accessed on January 30th, 2015).

movements. Instead, the FSB focused almost exclusively on the corrupt elites in power, following the old idea that "if we control the shah, we control the country." The problem was exacerbated by a shared background: former KGB generals now serving in Ukraine's security service, the SBU, told a different group of former KGB generals now serving in Russia's Federal Security Service what was happening in the country. As a result, odd ideas defined the FSB's approach. According to some sources, the FSB invested heavily in gathering information about ultra-nationalist groups in the West of the country, fearing a merger between Ukrainian and Polish nationalist movements, even though in fact such a merger was highly unlikely given the history of the relations between the two movements. When the crisis erupted, the only option for the FSB to explain what was happening in a country supposedly under full control and to justify its failure to forecast the crisis was to blame some powerful player beyond the borders, i.e. beyond the reach of the FSB – the West.

Putin enlisted both the siloviki and his civilian political team to counter the crisis. He brought back Surkov with the mission, according to the journalist Mikhail Zygar, to liaise with Yanukovych and keep him in power (Zygar 2015). Simultaneously, he sent a number of high-ranking FSB officers to Kiev to advise on how to suppress the street demonstrations. Both failed, and Yanukovych ultimately fled the country. Putin then switched to a more aggressive policy, based almost entirely on the siloviki. This meant first the occupation of Crimea, then support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, and eventually intervention in Syria's civil war in September 2015 to defend the pro-Russian leader Bashar al-Assad against Western-backed opposition forces and Islamist extremists.

The Crimean events are instructive. On the one hand, the relevant siloviki—in this case, the GRU—managed the military operation competently, limiting bloodshed. On the other hand, as Treisman documents (this volume), the political management of the intervention was poorly prepared and chaotic. The commander of the operation, Oleg

Belaventsev, a former spy and long-time associate of the defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, arrived in Crimea with practically no intelligence about the prevailing political situation.

The reason was that because the FSB had been focusing on Western Ukraine, it hardly had any intelligence positions or people at hand in Crimea. This prompted Putin to rely more on people who had at least some local knowledge and were adventurous enough to spring into action, people with connections in ultranationalist and radical Orthodox movements. One example is the Russian Orthodox billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, who became a power broker in Crimea and later in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁷

In Moscow, key decisions appear to have been made by Putin alone, in the heat of the crisis.¹⁸ Within a few days after the initial Russian intervention, the Kremlin's plan for the region's future evolved from autonomy within Ukraine to outright annexation by Russia. Remarkably, the failures of the FSB did not shake Putin's confidence in people from the security services and the army: throughout, Putin appears to have consulted only a handful of top officials, most of them siloviki, including Alexander Bortnikov, head of the FSB, and Shoigu, the defense minister.

In the subsequent uprisings in the Donbass and Lugansk regions of eastern Ukraine, Russia's security services seem to have been secondary players until quite late in the game. Volunteers from nationalist networks, funded by patriotic businessmen, took the lead, stirring up locals and organizing militias, before the Kremlin had taken any clear position. Although the Kremlin provided military support, it was only after the shooting down of a Malaysian

¹⁷ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/84481538-1103-11e4-94f3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz44TBzQURO>

¹⁸ Putin himself claimed in March 2015 that he had made the decision to take over Crimea alone and then summoned the chiefs of the security services to work out details (BBC, "Putin reveals secrets of Russia's Crimea takeover plot," March 9, 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31796226>). Putin gave a similar account to Treisman when asked about this at a reception in Sochi in October 2015. Asked whether he had consulted aides before deciding on the Crimea operation, he answered: "No, I told them we will do this and then that. I was even surprised at how well it went!" (Treisman, personal communication).

Airlines passenger jet in July 2014 that the Kremlin sought to impose more direct control over the rebellion.

All this suggests that the siloviki, as a group, were more the implementers of policies than a determinant of policy choices. Certain key siloviki played a much greater role because they happened to be important members of Putin's small circle of close associates. The policies Putin chose fit with the conservative, anti-Western, and action-prone worldview of the siloviki. But this reflected not security services lobbying but the fact that unexpected events—the Arab Spring and Moscow protests—seemed to validate this worldview.

Even those in Putin's close network probably influence him more by shaping the flow of information to him than by direct persuasion. Under Yeltsin, a number of competing security services provided information to the president, with the FSB, the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI) and the Presidential Security Service (part of the FSO) focusing on internal intelligence, and the SVR and GRU providing information about the outside world. This changed in 2003, when Putin split FAPSI between the FSO and FSB. Simultaneously, the Kremlin began to rely less and less on information provided by the Presidential Security Service, while the department of analysis, forecasting, and strategic planning of the FSB was strengthened and started to also provide information on developments abroad.

By the mid-2000s, much of the information received by the Kremlin was thus provided by the FSB, putting the agency into a position the Soviet KGB had never enjoyed. The Soviet Politburo, traumatized by Stalin-era purges, was determined to keep the secret police in check and deprived the KGB of any analytical function. The KGB was tasked to supply raw data to a group of consultants under the KGB chairman, all civilians, and it was their task to prepare analytical reports. Today, the FSB not only enjoys a near monopoly with respect to the provision of intelligence to the Kremlin, but the hierarchical organisational

structure of the agency puts enormous power into the hands of the FSB director, who has to countersign every document before it is presented to the president. He thus effectively controls what kind of information reaches Putin.

The importance of Putin's informal interactions with trusted siloviki friends, as opposed to his more formal contacts with force ministry officials, is also suggested by the details of the president's schedule. Using the official listing on the Kremlin's website, we analyzed data on all the personal meetings held by Putin since January 1st, 2000, (as well as those of Dmitry Medvedev since May 2008).¹⁹ These listings show a decline in the percentage of official meetings that Putin held with members of the force ministries since about 2008. While in 2000-07 about 14 percent of the president's meetings were with siloviki, the percentage declined to around 5.5 percent in 2008-15. Dmitry Medvedev, both as president and as prime minister, hardly met with the siloviki at all: only 2 percent of his official meetings were with members of the force ministries between 2008 and 2015 (Figure 1). Of course, the Kremlin website lists only official meetings, and those that the authorities have no reason to conceal. We interpret the patterns as suggesting that the key meetings on security—domestic and international—were increasingly held informally, between Putin and his trusted personal advisers, and thus not recorded on the public schedule.

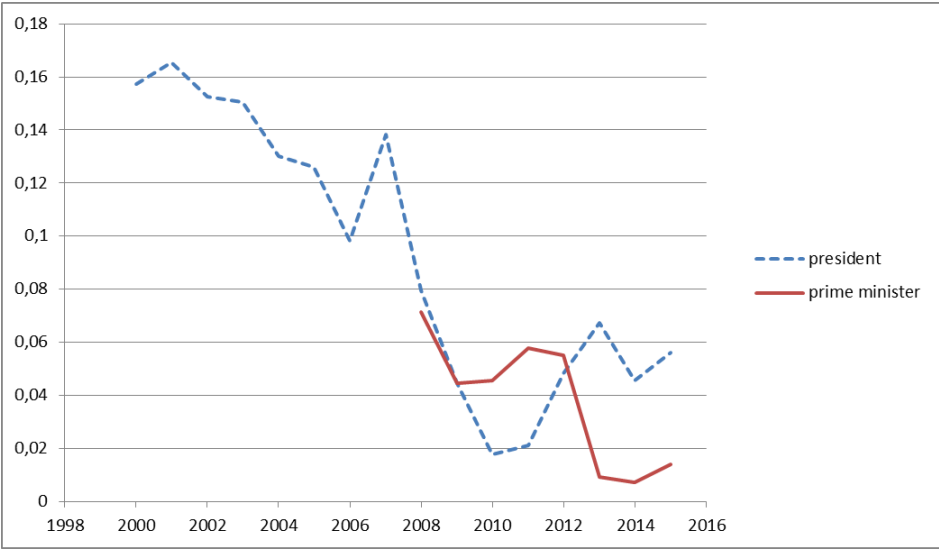
As early as 2005, two scholars concluded, based on a series of interviews with Russia's governmental elite:

the authority of the central executive is in practice devolved to a series of small and informal groups around the President himself. Putin prefers to work not with formal institutions but with ad hoc groups that are not defined by institutional boundaries. (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005).

This tendency appears to have intensified.

¹⁹ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news> (last accessed on January 31st, 2016)

Figure 1: Personal meetings of the Russian president or prime minister with people that either had a siloviki background or were working in a field related to the security services (as percentage of all meetings)



Source: kremlin.ru, premier.gov.ru.

While for most of the 2000s Putin’s inner circle included a balance of siloviki and economically knowledgeable technocrats such as Alexei Kudrin and German Gref, the latter group appears to have been sidelined in recent years. Even members of the government understand that they are on a short leash. In an interview in early 2015, the president of a major foreign business association described the strange atmosphere he had witnessed at a recent high level meeting on economic policy. At this event, the finance minister, the minister of economic development, and the head of the Duma budget committee had all agreed on urgent priorities, the respondent recalled, but hinted at their powerlessness. It was as if they were saying: “If only we were in power, we would know what to do.”²⁰

Although experts debate the exact composition of the inner circle, the siloviki listed in Table 1 are highly likely to be members.

²⁰ The interview was conducted by Rochlitz, together with two other colleagues from the Higher School of Economics, see Rochlitz (2016, page 21).

Table 1: Key siloviki close to President Vladimir Putin (with main positions)

Nikolai Patrushev	FSB director (1999 – 2008); Head of the Security Council of Russia (2008 – today).
Sergei Ivanov	Background in the KGB First Chief (intelligence) Directorate; SVR; FSB; Minister of Defense (2001 – 2007); First Deputy Prime Minister (2007 – 2008); Deputy Prime Minister (2008 – 2011); Chief of the Presidential Administration of Russia (2011 – 2016); member of the Security Council.
Igor Sechin	Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration (2000 – 2008); Chairman of Rosneft (2004 – today).
Alexander Bortnikov	KGB / FSB in Leningrad/St. Petersburg (1975 – 2004); Deputy Director of the FSB (2004 – 2008); Director of the FSB since 2008.
Alexander Bastrykin	Head of the Investigative Committee.
Viktor Zolotov	Director of the Russian President’s Personal Security Service (2000 – 2014); Deputy Interior Minister and Commander of the Internal Troops of Russia (2014 – 2015), chief of the National Guard (2015-)

Conclusion

While the siloviki, as a group, are too divided and disorganized to exercise a consistent influence over Russian political decision making, a number of individuals with a security service background have a significant—and in recent years probably dominant—impact on it. For years, the informal positions of these individuals as close advisors and associates of President Putin accounted for this. And that remains relevant even after Putin started to get rid of his closest associates in 2016, firing Victor Ivanov, whose antidrug agency was absorbed by the Interior Ministry, and dismissing Sergei Ivanov as head of the Presidential Administration. However, the new appointees from the FSO and FSB will never enjoy the status and stature of the first generation of Putin’s siloviki, and they certainly do not think of themselves as a “new nobility”—a group of equals led by Putin. Thus, the group of trusted advisors who can provide independent advice and ideas to the president—as well as occasionally challenging his views—is getting smaller, a trend that matches the overall tendency towards a narrowing down of competing sources of information in recent years.

On the other hand, the Kremlin is turning more and more to the toolkit of silovik techniques, both inside the country (selective repression against governors and federal officials to motivate the elites in the new election period) and outside it (active measures, hacking operations, increasing use of cyber measures).²¹ And Putin seems ready at times to privatize silovik techniques to freelancers outside the security agencies—such as the nationalist businessman Malofeev, with his Donbass volunteers, or squads of hackers and internet trolls.

Overall, Putin's switch from 2012 to harsher methods of domestic political control and a more assertive international line resulted not from lobbying by the siloviki—or even by Putin's top siloviki associates—but from the new challenges suggested by the Arab Spring and the Moscow protests. Putin interpreted these events in terms of the siloviki's narrative of US hostility and covert subversion. This switch upset the previous equilibrium between economic and political technocrats and siloviki in Putin's inner circle, weakening the former. The protests that started in late 2013 in Kiev, as well as subsequent events in Ukraine and their international ramifications, reinforced—at least temporarily—this shift in factional influence. As a consequence, for the near- to mid-term future it seems likely that the national-conservative agenda at home as well as Russia's assertive policies abroad will continue, at least until the deteriorating economy persuades Putin to open his cabinet again to Russia's liberal elite. Meanwhile, the licensing of the silovik toolkit to adventurous freelancers could make Russian actions, especially in foreign policy, even more risk seeking and unpredictable than before.

21 Andrei Soldatov, "Cyber Showdown," *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-07-31/cyber-showdown>

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