

# Power Surge?

## Russia's Power Ministries from Yeltsin to Putin and Beyond

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The “rise of the *siloviki*” has become a standard framework for analyzing Russian politics under President Vladimir Putin. According to this view, the main difference between Putin’s rule and that of former president Boris Yeltsin is the triumph of guns (the *siloviki*) over money (the oligarchs).

This approach has a lot to recommend it, but it also raises several important questions. One is the ambiguity embedded in the term *siloviki* itself. Taken from the Russian phrase for the power ministries (*silovie ministerstva*) or power structures (*silovie strukturi*), the word is sometimes used to refer to those ministries and agencies; sometimes to personnel from those structures; and sometimes to a specific “clan” in Russian politics centered around the deputy head of the presidential administration, former KGB official Igor Sechin. A second issue, often glossed over in the “rise of the *siloviki*” story, is whether the increase in political power of men with guns has necessarily led to the strengthening of the state, Putin’s central policy goal. Finally, as many observers have pointed out, treating the *siloviki* as a unit – particularly when the term is used to apply to all power ministries or power ministry personnel – seriously overstates the coherence of this group.

In this memo, I break down the rise of the *siloviki* narrative into multiple parts, focusing on three issues. First, I look at change over time, from the early 1990s to the present. Second, I discuss distinct agencies, rather than treating the power ministries as a single unit. Third, I distinguish between political power and organizational capacity.

Breaking down the issue this way leads to three conclusions. First, in one important respect, state coercive power is actually *less* central now than it was in the early 1990s – the possibility of violent clashes for power in the capital has declined considerably. The deployment of coercion in deciding who rules the state has become more indirect and institutionalized, with the ruling group able to employ the law enforcement system to repress potential rivals, well before violence spreads to the streets. Second, the key structure that has greatly increased its political power in the last decade is the FSB (Federal Security Service), the main successor to the KGB, and this rise was in no way inevitable. Third, for the three key power ministries – the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which controls the police, and the Ministry of Defense – the rise of the *siloviki* as a political clan, and as a group of personnel with similar backgrounds, has had a negligible effect on their capacity to fulfill their core tasks as established by law.

### **Same As It Ever Was: Force and Russian Politics under Yeltsin**

Even a cursory familiarity with Russian politics in the early 1990s should disabuse one of the notion that *siloviki* influence is a Putin-era phenomenon. Before Putin, the power ministries used force in Moscow to determine who would rule the state twice in little more than two years – in August 1991 and October 1993. In addition, a group of top officials from the power ministries – what would now be labeled a *siloviki* clan – were key advocates of the 1994 Chechen war.

Throughout much of his tenure, Yeltsin pursued ambiguous policies toward the power ministries. On the one hand, he seemed to fear the power of the security services, engaging in multiple reorganizations, name changes, and personnel shuffles. From 1992 to 1999, there were seven different directors of the main domestic intelligence service, the FSB and its predecessors, none of whom served for more than two years. Yeltsin also presided over the most drastic fall in modern history in the funding and fighting capability of a great-power military that had not been defeated in major war.

On the other hand, Yeltsin clearly understood the political value, if not necessity, of having *siloviki* that he could consider his own. This helps explain the long tenure of former minister of defense Pavel Grachev, who served for more than four years, longer than any other head of the three major power ministries under Yeltsin. Even more important was the enormous political influence of Aleksandr Korzhakov, Yeltsin's chief bodyguard and the head of the Presidential Security Service, who between 1993 and 1996 became one of the most powerful men in the country and a major player in Kremlin decisionmaking, from personnel matters to economic policy. In March 1996, Korzhakov and his close ally, FSB chief Mikhail Barsukov, almost succeeded in persuading Yeltsin to close down the Duma and postpone the impending presidential elections. Only the cooler heads of Yeltsin's political advisers and minister of internal affairs Anatoli Kulikov, a rising *silovik*, averted another potential violent showdown for power.

Yeltsin, in short, had a *silovik* problem. Time and again, the power ministries' importance in sustaining his rule and in coping with key public policy problems (such as Chechnya, crime, and military reform) had become obvious. But Yeltsin also prized loyalty, and he had few links to these structures before becoming president.

Throughout his tenure he ended up with people leading these structures who, in his view, were either of questionable loyalty or outright disloyal. Little wonder that there was so much turnover at the top.

## Putin and the Rise of the FSB

In his search for loyal *siloviki*, two names stood out as Yeltsin neared the end of his second term: Sergei Stepashin and Vladimir Putin. By any reasonable political assessment, Stepashin was the one more qualified to be president, having served in the parliament and three top government positions in the 1990s: FSB chief, minister of internal affairs, and minister of justice. Yeltsin, however, thought that Putin's political loyalty was firmer and his temperament was tougher. Putin became the heir apparent.

Until Putin's ascent, the FSB was only one among many competing power ministries. It had expanded its legal mandate considerably in the mid-1990s, and the number of former KGB personnel in government had already begun to expand during Yeltsin's second term. But until 1999, these changes had not developed a momentum of their own. For example, the two chiefs of the FSB in 1998, Nikolay Kovalev and Putin, were considered political lightweights, much less influential than not only the ministers of defense and internal affairs, but even the minister of emergency situations and the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).

The triumph of the FSB was thus highly contingent on Putin's personal ascent to power. Even if another *silovik* had become president in 2000, such as Stepashin or Yevgeni Primakov, who headed the SVR in the early 1990s, their much broader and longer professional experience at the top of Russian politics would have ensured a more diverse group of leading state officials. Putin's victory, combined with his limited pool of close colleagues, led the rise of the *siloviki* to be much more pronounced and to have a much stronger FSB tinge than it would have had in almost any other imaginable scenario.

Under Putin, the FSB has both absorbed and colonized some of its key power ministry partners and rivals. The FSB regained control over two former KGB departments, responsible for border protection and government communications, that had become independent organs under Yeltsin. Furthermore, former KGB officers were placed at the top of the other two main power ministries – the armed forces and the MVD – as well as several deputy spots in these agencies, and also at the head of a new power structure responsible for fighting the drug trade. In the case of defense minister Sergei Ivanov and minister of internal affairs Rashid Nurgaliyev, Putin's principal goal is control rather than reform. Their achievements in advancing military reform or fighting police corruption have been exceedingly modest.

The rise of the *siloviki* under Putin, then, at both the level of personnel and the level of organization, is primarily about the dominance of the FSB. As the elite prepare for another "Operation Successor" in 2008, however, post-Soviet Russian history suggests we should not overstate the stability Putin has brought to the system. Violent clashes such as those that occurred in October 1993 or a color revolution like that in Georgia and Ukraine are highly unlikely outcomes; Putin controls the guns much more firmly than Yeltsin ever did, and political opponents can be isolated much more easily. But

massive shifts at the top of the political system, comparable to Korzhakov's sudden fall in 1996 or Putin's swift ascent, are quite possible, and with such changes the relative influence of the power ministries could also change. Russia's superpresidential system, enshrined in the country's 1993 constitution and taken to extreme forms under Putin, makes the possibility of rapid change an enduring constant.

## Power Tools

Putin, like Yeltsin, has privileged loyalty and control over effectiveness and accountability in the power ministries. Putin, however, has been much more successful than Yeltsin. It is impossible, for example, to imagine Russia's prosecutor general opening criminal investigations into key Putin allies, or the head of the FSB aligning himself with an opposing "clan," as happened under Yeltsin. This change has also translated into stability in the top power ministry slots, with Sergei Ivanov, FSB chief Nikolay Patrushev, and former prosecutor general Vladimir Ustinov all serving considerably longer than any of their predecessors under Yeltsin. Furthermore, the law enforcement system has become much more controllable from the center, and the Kremlin has been both willing and able to use these organs for political purposes. The police harassment of Georgian businesses and individual citizens and residents in October 2006 serves as one recent example. In this sense, at least, Putin has built a stronger state.

Rapid economic growth under Putin has also meant more funding for all the power ministries. Extra funding has led to increased salaries that are paid on time and to greater equipment purchases. Undoubtedly, this has increased the organizational capacity of these agencies.

However, there are still striking weaknesses in the ability of the power ministries to carry out either specific tasks (like arresting and prosecuting the killers of a journalist or politician, or rescuing a group of hostages without massive loss of life) or general duties (such as fighting crime, corruption, and terrorism). For example, although in the last three years the murder rate has declined somewhat, to about 25 for every 100,000 individuals, it is still comparable to the rate of the late 1990s and extremely high by world standards. The drop in the murder rate is almost certainly explained by a growing economy, not better law enforcement work.

The failure to enhance power ministry capacity significantly is connected most of all to one of the most fundamental features of post-Soviet Russia: the marketization of the state along with the economy. The key assets of the *siloviki* are those that have commercial value. Army officers hire out conscripts as labor; the police and the FSB provide "roofs," or physical and legal protection, for everyone from small traders to major corporations; electronic eavesdropping departments are used to collect compromising information on politicians and businesspeople; and the prosecutor general's office opens and closes criminal cases on a commercial basis. Obviously, this is not the only thing that power ministry officials do; there are certainly many committed and (relatively) honest officials dedicated to serving the state. However, the failure to make serious inroads into fighting corruption and promoting the rule of law has to count as one of the greatest failures of Putin's presidency when comparing early

rhetoric and end-of-tenure reality.

## **Beyond 2008**

The commercialization of the power structures is likely to be the most enduring feature of their development over the last fifteen years. By contrast, the enhanced political power of the FSB may prove to be temporary; the political system remains more dynamic than outward appearances might suggest, and both the form and outcome of the succession transfer (if Putin does, in fact, leave office) will matter a lot.

Only if the next president considers accountability and effectiveness to be more important than loyalty and control should one expect major efforts to radically change how the power ministries operate. This, however, is not a likely shift in priorities, given current rules of the game. A new reform program for the power structures would surely encounter considerable opposition from those who profit, quite literally, from the current system.

To put it differently, the relative political power of the various power ministries, and of the *siloviki* clan, may change significantly after 2008, but the institutional capacity of these ministries will only change incrementally if at all. Power surges are temporary phenomena, but their consequences last considerably longer. Poor wiring can take a long time to fix, even with the most committed and competent electricians.