

Project 2008: Notes on the Russian Succession

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by Stephen Blank

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Introduction

Since President Vladimir Putin will leave office in 2008, Russia is undergoing a succession scenario. Such scenarios are the Achilles heel of its political system. But they also have implications beyond the question of who rules at home. Indeed, the course and outcome of this succession have profound repercussions for foreign policy and for Russia's further institutional development, not least as it applies to the relationship between the state and its multiple instruments of force or power structures. And from what we can already see a comprehensive strategy of internal consolidation that entails portraying Russia being a besieged fortress threatened by enemies from within and without, as well as moves towards an ever greater scope of a police state is taking shape.

Demonizing Foreign Enemies

It is very clear that constant attention has been paid to ensuring this succession since the last one in 2004 and especially after it became clear that phony elections could trigger uprisings such as those in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The pervasive fear of color revolution that are regularly attributed to the CIS and foreign NGOs demonstrate quite clearly the regime's fear of allowing "spontaneous" internal political processes to take place.

Neither is this fear of unfettered public expression unexpected. The abiding nature of Russian successions since 1991 clearly shows the new regime resorting to consistently high levels of both manipulation and if necessary violence to ensure its perpetuation. In all those previous cases, Russian rulers have resorted to violence and fomented crises in order to secure domestic popularity and legitimacy, e.g. Yeltsin's war with Chechnya in 1994.^[1]

We should also remember that he entertained thoughts of using force against domestic opponents in both 1996 and 1998. The recurrence of these phenomena is one of the most important indicators that the elite refuses to be bound by or be accountable to any system of laws or of legal-political institutions.

Several Western scholars, including this author, believe that the 1999 succession crisis was managed in order to tie Putin's ascension to power to the incitement of the war in Chechnya.^[2] The seizure of Yukos and the arrest of its chief executives, Platon Lebedev and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in 2003-04 represent another example of the resort to direct force and the

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fomenting of a crisis to further narrow the possibilities for democratization and strike at Westernizing forces in Russia.[3] Since then further moves have occurred in order to eliminate the possibility of a “color revolution” against a stage-managed election and to ensure the loyalty of all of Russia’s various multiple militaries. Putin’s subordinates had and have good reasons for fearing such an outcome. Despite the current mood of truculent boasting about being a superpower, in fact, as Heinrich Vogel suggests, the machinations of these elites betrays a profound insecurity about their status and the legitimacy of their position and the governing system.[4]

Both Western and Russian scholars know that this system is fundamentally insecure. Russia’s importance as a major energy and military, or more precisely recovering military, power, its function as the sponsor of anti-democratic movements or trends and alibi of last resort throughout the CIS for such tendencies, and its ability to block nonproliferation or to provide arms, nuclear reactors, know-how, and substantial political support for anti-Western and anti-American regimes, e.g. Iran, Venezuela, Syria, and Myanmar, provide major arms support for China, and even for terrorist movements, and finally the link between its fundamental domestic instability and its foreign policy, lead it to figure prominently in many different potential threat scenarios. As Stephen Hanson observes,

The central puzzle of Russian politics is that fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR, the country still lacks any stable and legitimate form of state order. The result is continuing pervasive political and social uncertainty—concretized in the palpable official fear that independent civil society organizations might promote additional “color revolutions” in Russia or other post-Soviet states and the endless rumors about various unconstitutional or semi-constitutional schemes Putin might employ to stay in power after his formal second term ends in March 2008. Bearing in mind that Russia remains the world’s largest country by territory and still possesses thousands of nuclear warheads as well as large stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, such uncertainty could quickly become a major international problem as well.[5]

These political conditions duly represent some of the reasons why even Russian analysts admit that Russia remains “a risk factor” in world politics, not the reliable pole of world politics that it claims to be.[6]

As regards foreign affairs, many analysts here and in Russia believe that at least some of the current adversarial quality of East-West relations is due to deliberate machinations by Putin’s regime which needs to stimulate an external enemy and domestic patriotism to maintain its popularity and find ersatz ways of legitimating itself since it has forsworn the constitutional road to legitimization. Thus Kremlin political analyst Sergei Markov has recently authored an article laying out an entire supposed plan of how the West will try to engineer a color revolution and discredit the elections for the Parliament and the President. The purpose of such foreign machinations is the usual one invoked by Putin’s media flacks, i.e. Western desires to weaken, exploit, and rob Russia.

Efforts to undermine the legitimacy of Russia’s elections serve a simple purpose: to weaken the next president and take advantage of his weakness to secure numerous concessions from Russia on a broad range of issues. What’s at stake in the election legitimacy question is Russia’s reputation, the power of the Russian government, and tens of billions of dollars in the Russian economy.[7]

Thus the regime has systematically launched a massive anti-American propaganda campaign at home along the lines outlined by Markov. For example, Vladimir Shlapentokh charges that an essential component of the Kremlin’s ideological campaign to maintain the Putin regime in power and extend it (albeit under new leadership) past the elections of 2008 is anti-Americanism.

The core of the Kremlin's ideological strategy is to convince the public that any revolution in Russia will be sponsored by the United States. Putin is presented as a bulwark of Russian patriotism, as the single leader able to confront America's intervention in Russian domestic life and protect what is left of the imperial heritage. This propaganda is addressed mostly to the elites particularly elites in the military and FSB) who sizzle with hatred and envy of America.[\[8\]](#)

Similarly the Russian philosopher Sergei Gavrov argues with regard to the loud assertions of Western military-political threats now in vogue that,

The threats are utopian, the probability of their implementation is negligible, but their emergence is a sign. This sign—a message to “the city and the world”—surely lends itself to decoding and interpretation: we will defend from Western claims our ancient right to use our imperial (authoritarian and totalitarian) domestic socio-cultural traditions within which power does not exist to serve people but people exist to serve power.[\[9\]](#)

And the course of foreign relations in general owes much to the general turn towards authoritarianism that clearly emerges from the Putin years. Minxin Pei of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observes that,

Russia and China have found common cause in Central Asia in trying to push out American influence. Even in the security area, Russia has become more willing to advance its ties with China, as can be seen in the first large-scale joint military exercises conducted on Chinese territory in 2005. The rapid improvement in ties and growing cooperation between China and Russia owes, to a great extent, not to any Chinese new initiative, but to Russia's changing relationship with the West under Vladimir Putin's rule. As President Putin became increasingly authoritarian, he needed China as an ally in counter-balancing the West. The net strategic effect of Russia's reorientation of its policy toward the West has been tremendously positive for China.[\[10\]](#)

Russian commentators have recently seconded those views. They maintain that much of the threat-mongering against the West or against ethnic minorities (generally from the East, i.e. Muslims) is intended to exploit nationalism on behalf of the regime in the upcoming elections.[\[11\]](#) Thus journalist Evgenii Kiselev wrote on June 6, “There is no longer any doubt: the foreign threat and the opposition to it is the main theme of the new election campaign.”[\[12\]](#) Finally, David Satter observes that,

The anti-Western policies of the Putin regime, far from being a mystery, actually make perfect sense. By insisting on the right to give orders to countries it once dominated, such as Georgia and Ukraine, Russia guarantees a series of needless conflicts that can be used to distract the Russian population from massive corruption while playing to primitive nationalistic instincts. A sign of the success of this policy is the mounting xenophobia in Russia and the tolerated attacks on dark-skinned foreigners in the streets. Anti-Western policies are also useful because they guarantee that Russia will absorb the West's attention. This can be depicted, with the help of state-controlled television, as a return to Russian greatness. Finally, anti-Western policies set the state for unrestrained demagoguery that can be used to undermine the ability of Russians to draw even the most basic moral distinctions. The most recent example was Mr. Putin's remark to a delegation of teachers that no one should try to make Russia feel guilty about the Great Terror of 1937 because in other countries even worse things happened.[\[13\]](#)

Obviously this combination of domestic authoritarianism and what Heinrich Vogel calls “the typical petrostate combination of presumed omnipotence and yet political insecurity of the political leadership” essentially ensures unpredictable but most probably anti-Western foreign policies for the foreseeable future.[\[14\]](#) Thus to the extent that the succession is utilized to inculcate a

domestic anti-Western mood that will also drive all Russian politics even further in an anti-Western direction, the consequences of that scenario for international security could be very negative. And the governmental organizations and policies cited below indicate the domestic-foreign linkages embodied in those policies, all of which facilitate the pursuit of an ever broader police or neo-Tsarist state.[15]

Police Power, Rivalry, and Rent-Seeking Among Dissidents and Elites

Certainly everything we have seen heretofore suggests that such manipulation will persist because there is no chance of this being an open, free, and fair election. This was already clear to observers in 2005.[16] A free media is certainly out of the question given the intimidation and violence meted out to journalistic critics of the regime and the state's encroaching takeover of ever more media outlets. Indeed that intimidation is continuing. In general we can discern a trend towards the creation of new, often extra-legal, organizations that seek to ensure ideological and political compliance and are backed up either by the resort to extra-legal and even paramilitary uses of force, or the overall extension of police power, including the potential use of one or more of the multiple militaries in a domestic role.

One example is the youth group Nashi. It has already been used to launch riots and demonstrations against Polish, Estonian, and British diplomats for actions that displeased the Kremlin, including ambassadorial meetings with members of the opposition. Nashi has also been used at home to intimidate opponents of the regime. It has enjoyed support from the Foreign Ministry for these attacks on diplomats.[17] Its members are financed opaquely but it is clear that it receives financing from pro-Kremlin oligarchs and probably from the state. Its main function is to conduct ideological indoctrination of a cult of personality for Putin and of fanatical loyalty to his regime and hatred for its opponents, domestic and foreign. This includes systematic anti-Western indoctrination.[18] One of its founders, the Kremlin propagandist Sergei Markov, stated that, "we launched Nashi in towns close to Moscow so that activists could arrive overnight on Red Square, if needed. The idea was to create an ideology based on a total devotion to the president and his course." [19] This organization which looks like a cross between the old Komsomol and the Hitler Jugend has conducted paramilitary training of its members in preparation for challenging street demonstrations by regime opponents and to carry out acts of intimidation against them, as it has done against the aforementioned embassies and diplomats as well as provincial Russian politicians. It functions as a powerful pressure instrument both in Moscow and in the provinces.[20]

Another example of the use of coercive force against potential opponents is the extension of state monitoring to ever more sections of the media. In January 2007 President Putin reminded the security services that,

It is important not only to ensure law and order, but also to protect society from attempts to push the ideology of extremism and national and confessional intolerance into the public-political field... This work must be done strictly in line with the law and all of your steps must be based on the Constitution and Russian laws.[21]

In March, 2007 Putin merged the Federal Service for Telecom Supervision (Rosvyznadzor) and the Federal Mass Media and Cultural Heritage Oversight Service (Rosokhrankultura), into a new Federal Service for Supervision of Mass Media, Telecommunications, and for Protection of Cultural Heritage. The purpose or goal of this amalgamation is,

To improve the efficiency of the government's activities for cultural heritage protection—and to eliminate the interdepartmental contradictions and administrative barriers en route to an IT advance in Russia and ease the system of their control.[22]

The consequences of this new organization's establishment are extremely ominous. As reported by Kommersant,

The new service will be very influential in the media, telecom businesses, and in political issues. In response to some technical and content claims, it may suspend activities related to all types of communications, including the printed and e-media, and broadcasters. Moreover, the service will keep the personal data register of Russia's citizens. So the matter at stake is creating a media mega-controller actually.[\[23\]](#)

More recently, on June 23, 2007, Putin's former assistant and now Chairman of the Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov, announced that he would guarantee that all parties have equal access to the media by conducting a "large-scale monitoring program." This monitoring would include all forms of media, both printed and electronic, "including that section of the internet that is registered as mass media."[\[24\]](#)

These steps taken in tandem with increased governmental—backing for hacker attacks, denial of service, and in general activities consonant with information warfare against opposition forums of electronic communication raise fears of a general totalitarian crackdown on all media, traditional and electronic.[\[25\]](#)

Even before the most recent decrees and anti-media activities, the regime had gone out of its way to silence opposition media. The murders of journalists throughout the country, Anna Politkovskaia being only the most famous among them, has stimulated a climate of fear among journalists, some of whom have personally communicated this sentiment to the author. But violence is only one weapon in the state's arsenal.

The regime exercises (subtle) power to ensure media orthodoxy. A popular method is to change ownership and to install an owner who complies with the editorial guidelines desired: that is, one that does not criticize the political leadership. Other state methods include the control of (financial) resources, economic pressure, appeals on patriotism, and implicit threats. An example of using pressure in this manner, Russian regulators have forced more than 60 radio stations to stop broadcasting news reports produced by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in 2006. Officials threatened to cancel the renewal of the offending radio stations' broadcasting licenses—as a consequence, most of the Russian stations stopped rebroadcasting these news reports.[\[26\]](#)

Neither are these actions the end of the potential use of the police power of the state to intimidate citizens, including members of the elite themselves. In keeping with the fact that, as several analysts have noted, Putin's Russia resembles Tsarist and even to some degree Soviet Russia, the regime has borrowed another page from medieval Muscovy and the USSR who forced citizens to spy on their neighbors.[\[27\]](#) Specifically the Federal Tax Service has issued an appeal to citizens to inform on their neighbors who rent apartments or homes without official contracts or who do not pay taxes.[\[28\]](#) The Federal Tax Service has also proposed expanding the range of sources that can or must submit information on the population's incomes to the tax authorities. This would include organizations that pay cash prizes to individuals, information on all sales of movable property, and the sales of means of transport.[\[29\]](#) Obviously the demand for information and informers will not stop here under the absence of a rule of law and the development of a police state buttressed by ever new mechanisms of repression and investigation.

This penetration of society by police and other informers has long been the case in the armed forces. Restoring the FSB's Special Departments and ordering them to prevent activity "by individuals aimed at harming Russia's security", and all mutinies and plots against the established constitutional order, Putin, upon coming to power, let the FSB recruit informers from within the army "on a confidential basis."[\[30\]](#) This was not an innovation, since in 1996-97 FSB members

publicly bragged about their political surveillance of the officer corps.[31] So now the FSB possesses the responsibility of preventing any activity aimed at harming Russia's security and monitoring all plans involving mutiny and efforts at a violent overthrow of the existing constitutional order, and has the right to recruit confidential agents. The FSB also now integrates all counter-intelligence units with its "unified, centralized system." [32] In addition the FSB formally controls the border guards, the counting of votes in the election, and guarantee of general state security.[33] But the demand for informers to report illicit income suggests a desire to extend this mechanism ever further throughout society as under communism.

Finally one of the most sinister of such new innovations and clearly a more important one in this context of elite rivalry in a succession is the creation of a new committee that will take over investigations from the General Prosecutor's (Procurator) office, including investigations of candidates for the Duma or for the presidency. This "Investigations Committee" (Sledstvennyi Komitet or SK) is apparently the product of complex maneuverings within the elite. While its creation represents a victory for the Siloviki—those from the power structures who wish to maintain a hard line—Putin apparently picked his own man to head it, his former classmate at Leningrad State University, Aleksandr' Bastrykin.[34]

This new agency fully corroborates the insight of Dmitry Trenin and Bobo Lo that, "The political life of post-Soviet Russia has been characterized by strong individuals operating at the expense of ever weaker institutions in an intensely competitive environment." [35] Consequently democratic institutions that can ensure the legitimacy of a succession or even of a government in power have atrophied and the Russian Federation's political history is characterized by one man rule and constant elite struggles around and for his support.[36]

The SK clearly owes its origin to internecine struggles among the ruling elite and is clearly conceived by them as a weapon against rivals in both regular political environments and during a succession. The SK transfers the right to conduct investigations and prosecutions from the General Prosecutor's office to itself and appears to many as the pilot project for a grand law-enforcement authority, not unlike the FBI in its heyday, that will unite and oversee all investigations. Thus whoever presides over it will become one of the most powerful people in a government that is not bound by law.[37] Given what the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover did in a country ruled by law, such a possibility must be regarded as highly alarming.

The SK essentially bypasses the General Prosecutor's office and is utterly independent of it with regard to its director's appointment, that of his subordinates, and its finances. All of those will be subordinated directly to the President, removing the whole sphere of investigation and prosecution of political and business figures from the purview of the regular government—although allegedly the Prosecutor General will review the SK's proceedings for their legality—and placing it under the control of the President and his Administration which is the real but shadow government of Russia. This exemplifies the process by which the truly effective but shadowy and unregulated institutions of government (so designated because there is little or no provision for them in the law or the constitution) rather than the ornamental and formally designated organs of government, namely the President's Administration, has usurped power in Putin's Russia.[38] Thus the SK will escape any accountability, even of a purely formal kind, to the Duma. And since Bastrykin is loyal to Putin personally, it seems clear that Putin is manipulating the "power vertical" to ensure that he and his appointments keep power, in this case by holding over all officials and politically interested personages the threat of investigation and prosecution.[39]

There is little doubt that the SK will become a major actor or at least a potential major actor in Russian politics, specifically the Putin succession. Some analysts argue that Putin intends to control all investigations personally through his choice of Bastrykin.[40] But if this was not enough the SK has the potential to emerge, much as did Andrei Vyshinsky's office of the Procurator-General did in the great purges, as a major instrument for the redistribution of political and economic power. Thus it already can become a permanent sword of Damocles over the entire

political system and its members. Here we must remember that in this system office (and political power) is property just as under medieval feudalism and the Soviet Nomenklatura regime.

Under Mr. Putin, the handful of people who run Russia also own it. Government officials are on the board of Russia's largest state-run companies. First Deputy Premier Dmitry Medvedev is chairman of the board of Gazprom, Igor Sechin, Deputy Head of the Kremlin Administration, is chairman of Rosneft oil company, and Igor Shuvalov, an assistant to the President, is chairman of Russian railroads. The capitalization of Gazprom is \$236 billion, Rosneft \$94 billion, and Russian railroads \$50 billion. It is estimated that the people around Mr. Putin control companies that account for 80% of the capitalization of the Russian stock market.[\[41\]](#)

Likewise, given the ongoing nationalization of the defense industrial sector that is spreading into the automotive, heavy metal, shipbuilding, and both military and civilian aircraft sectors, and could embrace the high-tech and IT sector, those areas are also prize pickings for an unrestrained rent-seeking elite.[\[42\]](#) For example, Vladimir Mukhin has written that,

According to the roughest estimates, over one-half of the country's budget will come under the new military-industrial control. Solely in respect of direct allocation around \$16 Billion will officially pass through the Russian Federation Defense Ministry-controlled Federal Agency for the Defense Order and Federal Agency for Military-Technical Cooperation in 2004 (according to economic Development and Trade Ministry data, 341.2 Billion rubles will be removed from the defense order and R 150 Billion from the arms business). Expenditure on special construction and military reform, as well as on defense industry administration must be put into this category. *However, Comptroller's Office audits of the military department regularly reveal the nontargeted use of vast resources.*[\[Italics author\]\[43\]](#)

The Ministry of Defense now includes the Russian Federation Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, Federal Service for the Defense Order, and Federal Service for Technical and Export Control, which have been transformed from committees under the Russian Federation Defense Ministry, plus the Federal Agency for Special Construction.

The Defense Ministry will also control the Federal Agency for Atomic Energy, which is part of the new Ministry of Industry and Energy. The Russian Federal Railroad Troops Service, disbanded by presidential edict, has also passed to the ministry. The ministry's oversight functions extend to the administrations for munitions, conventional weapon, guidance and control systems, and shipbuilding that were reestablished within the Industry and Energy Ministry in place of the analogous agencies that have been abolished.[\[44\]](#) Thus the Ministry acquired control of the entire defense industry complex (OPK) whose four agencies: the Russian Conventional Arms Agency (RAV), the Russian Agency for control Systems (RASU), Rossudostroyeniye (Russian Shipbuilding Agency, and Rosboyepripasy (Russian Munitions Agency) were disbanded. Rosaviakosmos, the Russian Air and Space Agency was divided between the Space Agency and the aviation sector that became part of the Federal Industry Agency with the other four liquidated agencies. These moves also added 100,000 railroad troops to the MOD's rolls.

Since the opportunities for power and rent-seeking here as well as in the other sectors quoted above, are enormous, the elite has a great deal to lose from the use of the SK as a political and economic weapon. This danger is particularly acute inasmuch as this system inherently generates an equally enormous incitement to intense intra-elite political struggles during a succession as control over all of these rents and sources of power will be consistently contested by multiple rival claimants for access to them. It follows that bureaucratic politics, i.e., the unending struggle for turf at other players' expense, dominates Russian politics and fosters a mentality of permanent rivalry, conspiracy, zero-sum games, intimidation, and reliance upon patron-client networks.

Under the circumstances this and every succession, as well as the run-up to them, are characterized by an intense no holds barred competition for power and property. We may envision the SK as an institution that simultaneously abets and restrains this kind of politics (by creating a pervasive possibility of investigation and conviction among all elites). Coming into power, Russia's current leaders sought to convert power into property to acquire those assets and utilized state agencies under their control to deprive owners of energy firms or of mineral deposits of that ownership and control. All these groups, having divided up the spoils, currently enjoy Putin's protection. But as he is leaving, everything they own is now at risk from whomever might win the succession sweepstakes. As a recent analysis observes,

It is now fundamentally important for the Kremlin groupings to preserve their political assets, and they can only be augmented at the expense of rivals in the shadow "vertical axis of power." One of the most viable methods for legitimating less than perfectly clean assets and illicit power is the legalization of the political status of the players—their presence in the Duma, the Federation Council, the government, and the future President's staff. Correspondingly, virtually the most effective way of fighting your rivals is to prevent them getting into legal politics. Here control of the Investigations Committee, which will begin work on 1 September 2007—will be very handy. Even now membership of United Russia or Just Russia, or even the post of senator, governor, or mayor, is not a safeguard against criminal prosecution. Given the intensification of the struggle among pro-regime groupings at a time when supreme power in the country is changing hands, it is perfectly logical from the viewpoint of the interests of the current business elites to give the Prosecutor's office a political oversight role. On the one hand, this will make it possible to prevent, for example, a joint opposition candidate from participating in the presidential election, if such a candidate should eventually emerge. On the other, it will provide an opportunity to prevent rivals from other groupings from strengthening their position at the expense of the regions.^[45]

This monster of the SK, can be used to purge enemies from their positions to clear space for members of a victorious grouping, just as occurred in 1937, if not Ivan the Terrible's Oprichnina. As this commentary observed,

Of course, the economic articles of the Criminal Code are not going to disappear from the political struggle. And the process of redistributing assets or raw material resources among the "victors" will continue nevertheless. But the "political articles both provide an opportunity to combat the non-establishment opposition (those who are not part of the Kremlin political pool) and also allow some sections of the system to fight others. Economic raids on behalf of the state with the assistance of, again, the prosecutor's Office have become one of the key elements of the Putin era. It appears that we are now entering an era of political raiding when the owners of dubious assets and people with a weak position in the regime will be emerging from the shadows using legal political institutions and not allowing their the rivals to do the same. So the Investigations Committee will still play a role in Russia's political history irrespective of which specific Kremlin groupings are behind its creation and what thrust they impart to this body's work.^[46]

Civil-Military Relations and the Succession

None of these efforts to silence critical media, intimidate all political and economically significant actors, inculcate a state ideology, and divert domestic attention by proclaiming that the enemy is at the gates should surprise us as they are long-standing tools of the regime.

Already in 2004 Putin's underlings celebrated the fact that they have smashed all institutions and bureaucratic "veto groups" as well as any hope of autonomous political action from the Duma.

Igor Bunin, Director General of the Center for Political Technologies, stated then that Putin's reforms have aimed at converting the entire state system into a mono-centric administration where he and his entourage have all the power. In such a system conflicts within the bureaucracy are supposedly absent because it is vertically integrated. Hence the government becomes a technical instrument rather than a policy initiator, a task reserved for Putin and his entourage in the presidential chancellery.^[47] And in effect the regular or formal government structures are merely ornamental while shadowy institutions like Putin's chancellery are the truly efficient or effective instruments of governance.^[48] In fact, under Putin there are now nearly a hundred agencies who answer exclusively to him and execute his instructions with no accountability at all to anyone else. This fact alone would suffice to underscore the growth of an effective shadow regime in place of a formal, ornamental state.^[49]

Nonetheless this outcome evidently remains insufficient for the ruling elites. Numerous Russian commentators have for some time observed that Russia has cast itself as a "besieged fortress," charging Washington with imperialism, launching an arms race, interfering in the domestic policies of CIS states including Russia, expanding NATO, unilateralism, disregarding international law when it comes to using force, and resorting to military threats against Russian interests, etc.^[50] Regime spokesmen, e.g. Vladislav Surkov, also openly state that Russia must take national control of all the key sectors of the economy lest they be threatened by hostile foreign economic forces and so called "offshore aristocrats."^[51] Surkov's assessment clearly is premised on the internal threat of a divided elite, in other words, a governing structure that is inherently precarious and fractured internally. The endless reports about struggles between so called "liberals and Siloviki" or more accurately rival political clans indicate that Surkov's fears are well-founded. Analysts such as Lilia Shevtsova also argue that the regime can only maintain the status quo during and after the election campaign by preventing a schism from within its ranks.^[52]

Under the circumstances continuing electoral, institutional, and constitutional machinations and manipulation are increasingly the order of the day. And many of them revolve around the so called "Silovye Struktury" or power structures, both the multiple armed forces and the police. This is more than the issue of the so called "parachuting" of so many veterans of these power structures into key government positions under Putin, himself a KGB veteran.^[53] The frenzied hope of certain elite sectors that Putin would either openly flout the constitution and run in 2008 or arrange for a "shadow President" (in reality a shadow Tsar given the nature of the system) to hold his place for four years betrays the inherent insecurity, illegitimacy, and illegality of the entire process. A dispassionate analysis of the system would suggest that Russia's continuing failure to resolve critical constitutional questions renders the entire political system vulnerable to periodic coups and even to the threat of internal wars. This is not the least reason why official and unofficial threat assessments fuse together foreign with domestic enemies, e.g. Markov's charge that the West will use domestic opponents of the regime to undermine it and exploit Russia afterwards.^[54] Certainly the absence of truly democratic or effective civilian control over the use of the armed forces creates a constant temptation to military adventurism.

Accordingly since 2004 there have been numerous and continuing actions to ensure the loyalty of the Silovye Struktury, organizations connected with the use of force.^[55] Military reforms have increasingly assumed the aspect of preparation for an intensified domestic struggle involving use of force or the threat thereof. This point is especially pertinent to the ongoing and concurrent modernization and transformation of the force structure of Russia's multiple militaries, particularly the ground forces, the Ministry of Interior's Internal Forces (Vnutrennye Voiska Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del'or VVMVD), and the Federal Security Service (Federativnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti or FSB).

These forces are currently undergoing sustained overhaul and transformation in order to become more mobile, more able to project power rapidly throughout Russia's expanse, and more capable of meeting the threat posed by terrorist or other insurgents in the Caucasus and/or Central Asia. Thus those forces are being transformed in ways that could allow politicians in the future to

complete their transformation into primarily domestic counter-insurgency forces along Latin American or more general Third World lines where domestic security is the Army's main function. Since an armed coup or the threat of the deployment of force within the Russian Federation's boundaries as a way to influence the 2008 succession is an ever-present possibility, these transformations of force structure, though intended to meet genuine international threats like terrorism and insurgency or the imaginary threat of a U.S. or NATO strike, could have radically different, but no less profound consequences for Russia, its neighbors and interlocutors.

To say that Putin's and former Defense Minister's Sergei Ivanov's reforms of the Russian military's force structure could point toward their potential use primarily in support of a domestic coup either in Moscow or against terrorism in the North Caucasus is not to neglect the disastrous state of those armed forces since 1991 and the appearance of real terrorist threats that truly justify force modernizations. Those two factors, the Army's unsuitability for the contemporary threat environment and its poverty, have necessitated these reforms and drive the need for thoroughgoing defense reforms even under conditions of perfect security from interstate attack, e.g. from America or NATO.

But despite this relatively benign threat environment, Russian leaders do not believe they live under conditions of security from attack. Leading members of the government firmly believe Russia is under siege from the West's military superiority, terrorism, and the allegedly conjoined threat of ideological subversion as manifested in the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kyrgyz revolutions of 2003-2005 and in supposed foreign support for Chechen leaders.[56] As a result they believe that the "enemy is at the gates," that opponents of the Chechen war and proponents of reform constitute "a fifth column", and that unless the elite is totally united behind Putin the state could disintegrate quite easily.[57]

In other words, the current elite has revived the Leninist notion of a state challenged from within and from without and where the external and internal enemy are essentially one and the same. Surkov's sovereign democracy and its portrayal of an internal split among elites exemplifies the internal dimension of this threat perception while the charge that the West is seeking to undermine Russia both domestically through the use of NGOs, elections, and incitement to color revolutions, as well as through fabricated military threats represents the external dimension of this threat perception. As happened under Lenin and Stalin, albeit in attenuated form today, this is basically a call for a perpetual civil war at home in this case against dissidents, not to mention a "state of siege" abroad. Naturally this political posture greatly affects the defense establishment's threat assessments and ensuing force development plans and the perceptions of those civilians who will ultimately influence or decide those forces' deployments.

Certainly we cannot place much hope on legal constraints to the domestic use of the armed forces. Indeed, the precedent of the Chechnya war has already severely weakened any possibility of using laws applying to terrorism and martial law against the takeover by armed forces of the state. Writing about Chechnya and the use of the 1998 law on terrorism to prosecute the current war there, Alexander Cherkasov and Dmitry Grushkin state that,

The law 'On the Struggle Against Terrorism' was originally intended to regulate the local and the short-term use of force where an immediate reaction was required and where there was no time to gain Parliamentary sanction, the counter-terrorist operation provisions were used again in August 1999 to allow the use of armed force without an emergency or martial law, which would have required the sanction of Parliament. In this event, this law on the struggle against terrorism has been used for many years in an area that covers many thousand square kilometers.[58]

The outcome of such procedure is not surprising. As they observe,

Security agencies have been granted wide powers without any serious normative base to control and regulate the use of these powers. This has been recognized, in particular, by the military procuracy. Therefore, in using the law on the struggle against terrorism and the system allowed by 'counterterrorist operations' to limit civic rights in the zone of armed conflict in the Chechen Republic, the Russian authorities consciously created a legal vacuum. This artificially created vacuum is filled with legal practices based on the arbitrary interpretation of laws, and often on their conscious infringement. The results of this 'judicial experiment' have been the mass infringement of human rights.[\[59\]](#)

Neither would it be excessively difficult to centralize control over troublesome regions like the North Caucasus so that they are ruled directly by Moscow, essentially under something like martial law and in order to prevent the corruption and terrorism that pervade the North Caucasus. Putin's commission to investigate conditions in the North Caucasus, chaired by his right hand man, Dmitry Kozak, recommended that Moscow directly take over the entire region.[\[60\]](#) Given the elite penchant for identifying terrorists, NGOs, foreign intelligence organizations and governments as one conglomerated enemy and Putin's demands that Russian NGOs renounce foreign financing so that they are totally at the state's mercy, it would not be beyond the imagination of some bright young fellows in the Kremlin to conjure up the required scenario for imposing martial law in troubled or potentially troublesome regions and a domestic constitutional coup in the name of counter-terrorism.

It is often overlooked that a key element of Putin's centralizing reforms to enroot a "power vertical" was to ensure centralized control over the means of force. This connection had become clear by the time of Putin's Presidential Address of 2001.

The Presidential Address officially created a framework for the administrative reform in Russia, which, however, was already under way in practice. This systemic approach to regional security in 2001 meant, first of all, establishing a network of institutions that would allow and assist the PE's (Presidential Envoys) in their districts to unify the regions and territories within their respective FDs (Federal Districts). At the same time it was necessary to implement several measures that would limit the influence of the authorities (at the governor or republican level) on the power bloc ministries, judicial system or any branches of the federal institutions in the regions. This excluded and decreased the influence of local structures on security and defense issues and established strict subordination of vertical authority in these matters. These measures were also perceived as a drive towards optimization and efficiency, leading to a decision to cut all overlapping expenditures.[\[61\]](#)

Indeed, subsequent analyses showed that the introduction of the Federal or Presidential Districts and envoys was largely due to Putin's desire to gain centralized control over the budgets, police, military, and judicial powers of the regions. While that desire was understandable given Putin's belief when he took power that the state was in danger of disintegrating due to centrifugal tendencies and powers vested in regional governors; his reforms then and afterward have had consequences that reflected other motives as well. Certainly we can see a desire for untrammelled and quasi-autocratic power that has led Russian observers to note Putin's Tsar-like status.[\[62\]](#) And that aspiration to such a status has only become more evident with his September 2004 proposal to abolish regional elections for governor.[\[63\]](#) Essentially this reform subordinates the entire provincial and ultimately municipal system of government, to central direction and dictation from above. Thus it also would further centralize Moscow's command authority over all military forces stationed in the Interior.

The regressive nature of the emerging structure of power is also visible in this proposal which contemplates a throwback to the Tsarist system of governors-general whose responsibility is not to their bailiwick but to the Tsar and/or the Ministry of Interior, in this case the presidential chancellery in Moscow. Governors will now hold their job not on the basis of regional election, but on the basis of central nomination. Moreover, their tenure is perpetually at risk as they could be

dismissed at any time by Putin for criminal activity. Inasmuch as everyone engages in such activity and if they do not do so a case can be easily fabricated, the governors now live under Putin's sword of Damocles. Thus it is not an unwarranted suspicion that the purpose behind this reform is to give Putin all these powers to create a loyal infrastructure exclusively beholden solely to him.[64]

But beyond that consideration, there exists even greater reinforcement for the argument that a prime motive behind the original decrees of 2000 and the subsequent abrogation of gubernatorial elections is connected to the revamping of military and police structures which, given the existence of multiple militaries, amounts to much the same thing. As Nikolai Petrov observed in 2002, the attributes of the new system, particularly its deficiencies from the point of view of federalism, confirm that it has been designed primarily for purposes of policing.[65] Indeed, the reforms enacted by the government also entailed a tremendous strengthening of the scope of the MVD's powers over local and provincial police and the ministry's responsibilities over economic issues like migration.[66] The MVD was also then subjected to reorganization that divided its forces in three parts:

A federal police dealing with serious crimes, which strengthens the center's position and eliminates the governors' influence on regional MVD Departments; a municipal militia dealing with public order and financed by regional budgets; and a new Federal Guard to replace internal troops. The Federal Guard will form special organized crime in federal districts and groupings in regions with complicated socio-political and criminal situations. Internal Troops districts, which have shaped federal reform, will be demolished.[67]

Furthermore, the size of these districts underscores the point that "the larger the basic territorial units, the tougher the control the center has to exercise in order to keep the country together." [68] Finally the nature of Putin's appointments to gubernatorial positions, taken in this context, also supports the notion that he has successfully carried out a typically Russian form of cadre renewal and purge that he finds especially congenial. Specifically,

It is only a short step from here to the 'conspiracy hypothesis' which examines Putin's special style of 'bypass surgery' in which new organs—duplicating the functions of existing ones—are created in order to later replace the original ones. The introduction of the system of federal districts serves then to construct a new vertical power rather than to strengthen the old one. At the same time, the institutional reform creates space for a large-scale cadre reform. Indeed, what the envoys have really managed to accomplish is to eliminate the monopoly of the 'old guard' in the presidential administration over relations with regions while they have only started to weaken the alliance (maybe even merger) between corrupt politicians and criminalized business at the regional level.[69]

Petrov also warned about the consequences of such reforms.

The federal reform is not only about reorganization of the power ministries, although the ministries are the central element due to their status as both the base and infrastructure of Putin's regime. Reform is oriented toward creating a controlled monolith of Russian society and providing manageability and tough control in a semi-military order, including direct subordination, strict distribution of responsibilities, power verticals, and state control over business. This strategic mega-project is a reminder of Beria's alternative of absolute dominance of the Communist Party. Although it can be hardly realized in full, mere attempts to realize it can lead to serious negative consequences for Russian society.[70]

Similarly, the actual reorganization or reform of the force structures of the multiple armed forces began in the late 1990s, although it was not properly assessed either in Russia or abroad during

that time of intense military crisis.[71] And it was Russia's defeat in the Chechen war of 1994-96 and subsequent preparation for a new round that began in 1999 which has driven much of these reforms. The aforementioned 1998 law on terrorism has either stood behind or been the impetus for many of the organizational reforms since then within the multiple militaries. As Professor Gustaf Brunius of Stockholm University observes,

The fight against terrorism is different from the traditional role of the RF (Russian Federation) Armed Forces in two ways. To start with, when discussing counter terrorist operations, it is not possible to draw a clear line between Peace and War, a distinction that up to this moment had been crucial to the classical structural composition of the Armed Forces' structures. Furthermore, the fight against terrorism is not limited to military violence but it is built on the pooling of assets from several organizational areas. In this sense the counter-terrorist legislation entailed a reduced distinction between policing, state security, and war-fighting. In line with the July 1998 decrees on Military Reform, the Counter-Terrorist law was built upon the notion that command over security organs on the operational-strategic level should be centralized.[72]

Nor did this centralized leadership have to reside in the hands of the commander of any particular military district. He was, instead, seen as one of several different possible commanders of counter-terrorist operations.[73] Thus the local FSB or MVD commander could be entrusted with that command responsibility. Command and force structures for counter-terrorist operations ultimately became fungible, i.e. movable from one organization and command to another. This, as Brunius explains, is exactly what was intended, i.e. to give the President total and direct control over all forces engaged in counter-terrorist operations.

The area of Counter-Terrorist operations has developed into becoming the main securitized area in the RF. With the counter-terrorist legislation giving the President more extensive authority than [did] the defense legislation, once could say that this is a development that has increased the power of the President. In effect the new legislation has functioned as a parallel chain-of-command that makes the President capable not only of exercising direct control over the security organs. It also makes it possible to use the security structures on the domestic scene without having to declare a State of Emergency. The power of the President primarily lies in the power to define 'terrorism,' thus defining an area that can become the focus of the security apparatus. This power of the President can, of course, be criticized, but, in a way, the extensive authority on this area only reflects the fact that terrorism is being seen as the most serious threat to the federation. In the late 1990s, the two organizational themes of defending the constitution (i.e. the State) and the defense against terrorism have developed into being perceived as one and the same.[74]

Thus the legal and organizational preconditions for repeating what Putin and Yeltsin essentially did in 1999 are already set and as we saw above this 1998 law allows for the imposition of a version of martial law or state of emergency through essentially extra-legal means, e.g. a presidential decree. All that need be done is to devise a sufficiently plausible terrorist threat scenario permitting the use of force within Russia, whether in Moscow or the North Caucasus, to achieve the elite's aims of perpetuating Putin's regime through a constitutional coup. Meanwhile, in order to meet the real and spreading terrorist threat within Russia, reforms of the force structure that would let commanders and forces other than the regular Ministry of Defense forces command and conduct such "counterterrorist" operations, are occurring. Their main aim is to enhance Russia's ability to meet these increasingly urgent threats, not to ensure the succession. Nevertheless under current conditions that could be the ultimate, if unintended, result of these reforms.

Neither have reforms with regard to enhancing the police powers of the state stopped. Recent military moves suggest a deliberate effort to ensure military loyalty at the expense of any hope of demilitarizing Russian politics and putting the armed forces under truly democratic civilian control. First, Putin extended the tenure of chief of Staff General Yuri Baluyevsky for three years even

though he reached the mandatory retirement age in early 2007. This was widely interpreted as a reward for service and as a signal to the armed forces that no more “destabilizing” reforms would be undertaken in return for its loyalty to whomever Putin chooses.^[75] Likewise, the replacement of Sergei Ivanov, a leading candidate for Putin’s succession, as Defense Minister by Anatoly Serdyukov and Ivanov’s promotion to be Deputy Prime Minister almost certainly were tied to Putin’s efforts to manage the succession up to the last moment.

This reshuffle goes some distance to undoing Putin’s promotion of the Ministry of Defense over the General Staff in 2004 and restoring the General Staff’s primacy in defense planning in return for its loyalty.^[76] Indeed, when making these moves, Putin announced that the General Staff would recover some of the responsibilities it lost in 2004.^[77] Serdyukov’s tasks would mostly concentrate on auditing, and controlling (in the Russian sense of *Kontrol’*) procurement spending and defense spending in general.^[78] Of course, the price paid is a further retreat from the demilitarization of Russian politics and the establishment of genuine civilian and democratic control over the armed forces.

Pavel Felgengauer, a leading defense correspondent, sees this reshuffle as intending to weaken Ivanov’s position among the military, enhance the General Staff’s power and authority, and create two decision-making centers in the military so that there will not be a unified military organization upon which someone could rely to challenge the process or results of the upcoming 2008 presidential election. Another approach suggests that both this reshuffle and the dramatic escalation of East-West tensions generated by Putin from his Munich Wehrkunde speech of February 2007 are intended to create a situation where Russia’s political development depends on him alone and foreign influence is excluded.^[79]

Other analysts regard this reshuffle as an attempt to provide balance and further rivalry between Ivanov and the other front-runner for the succession, Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev while at the same time bringing in a new and third Deputy Prime Minister, Lev Naryshkin to compete with and balance the former two. Not surprisingly, Naryshkin now figures prominently in considerable speculation, encouraged by Putin’s aides, e.g. Igor Shuvalov, as a potential “dark horse” or “third candidate.” In the larger context, then, this reshuffle is also seen as Putin’s effort to set up a system of “checks and balances” (a beloved device of all Russian dictators to keep successors and contenders off balance) to “rein in” any successor’s power and opportunities.^[80] The passing of a budget for three years to go through 2010 must be accounted as another effort to restrict any future ruler’s room for discretionary economic and political maneuver.

Be that as it may, it is clear from this move and from the maneuver in the Ministry of Defense that enhances the General Staff at the expense of the Ministry of Defense that Putin is consciously moving away from his own administrative reforms of 2004 that were supposed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the government and its ministries by reducing parallel power centers. Instead he is again multiplying both the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense as well as the state machine by creating new Deputy Prime Ministers. Once again law cannot restrain the appetites of individuals and short-term political considerations. Russia, as these moves indicate, is not even able to reach the level of “regular government,” an ideal of Tsarist reformers in the 18th and 19th centuries and is devolving again into a congeries of diverse and uncoordinated offices responsible only to the Tsar. As Shevtsova suggests, the bureaucracy is again consolidating itself or being consolidated from above because whoever succeeds Putin will inevitably have no choice but to consolidate his power by denouncing his predecessor and forcing Putin’s team to step aside.^[81]

In this context, more recent moves in 2006, such as revisions of the electoral laws, may be seen as preparation for an engineered succession whose current indeterminacy alarms Kremlin insiders. Certainly the military instrument within Russia itself has already been prepared, if

needed, for action during the election of 2008.^[82] Gavrov's remarks above follow this line of thought.^[83]

Under the most favorable explanation for recent political violence and assassinations directed against regime critics like Anna Politkovskaya and Alexnader Litvinenko, alleged "rogue elements" of the FSB are trying to impose one or another political scenario upon Russia and destabilize the Putin regime. If this is true it hardly furnishes evidence of Russia's reliability or stability with regard to world politics. And if the state committed those assassinations then we are dealing with what truly is a criminalized and rogue state. This last charge is not as surprising as it may seem, for Russian and foreign observers have long pointed to the integration of criminal elements with both the energy, intelligence and defense industrial sectors of the economy.^[84]

Conclusions

Obviously several intersecting processes are occurring. Regime elites simultaneously are jockeying for position and power, including rents that they will be able to retain at the expense of their rivals in the upcoming succession. Some of them are trying to restructure the system so that Putin can function as the grey eminence even if someone else is formally in charge, and Putin is trying to ensure that his legacy and policies, if not his power are maintained after he leaves office. As a result Putin, who remains the last authoritative actor in the system, refuses to commit to any successor and seeks to exploit these rivalries to maintain his discretion e.g. by appointing his man, Bastrykin, to head the SK and to divide up the armed forces so they can put down opposition but not mount a challenge to him. Similarly his efforts to ensure control over state spending and the budget reflect his ambition to place a whole series of "continuity mechanisms" or checks and balances over the entire political system at the same time as he is fashioning a future domestic policy that will undoubtedly increase state controls in the economy and over state spending.^[85]

But in doing so he has strengthened the tendencies toward despotism and a police state, most notably through institutions like the SK. The ongoing nationalization of key economic sectors, the intensification of the struggle for the CIS and against the West, and the growing resort to police intimidation and violence against critics like Politkovskaya and Litvinenko also find their analogue in this future domestic policy. In other words authoritarian rule, nationalist mobilization against domestic and foreign enemies, and a police state cannot easily be confined to one sphere. Instead these forces have engulfed the entire system and will continue to do so until they break down or meet superior force. It is unlikely that the authoritarian regime consolidated by Putin can stay where it is or retreat to democracy unaided or unless it is compelled to do so by external forces stronger than it. But, as we have suggested, it is all too possible for it to become steadily more authoritarian and corrupt while remaining within the Muscovite paradigm (with Soviet admixtures) alluded to above.

Succession struggles remain the Achilles heel of the system because they force an ever clearer exposure of its fault lines and inherent fragilities for all of Putin's undoubted successes. Close examination of these fault lines reveal the growing pathology of the regime's politics even as it advances economically and fiscally. But unfortunately for those who think that in Russia the economy will triumph over the state, we should remember that this economy is largely a creation of that same pathological state and is excessively tied to rents from energy. The scale of corruption, violence, and misrule has its own logic as well as its own timetable, which we cannot know in advance. But especially as this system reproduces the paradigm of past Russian experiments in state-building, we can predict the destination with reasonable accuracy, especially as Russia has tragically been there before.

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