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THE *SILOVIKI* IN CHARGE

Andrei Illarionov

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Who are the holders of political power in Russia today, and what is the relationship between them and the rest of Russia's people? The answer to the first question boils down to the *siloviki* (sometimes called "securocrats" by political scientists). These are the people who work for, or who used to work for, the *silovye ministerstva*—literally "the ministries of force"—charged with wielding coercion and violence in the name of the state. All told, there are 22 such agencies in today's Russia. The best known is the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the Soviet-era KGB secret-police and spy agency. Other coercive agencies are associated with the Interior Ministry, various branches of the military, the state prosecutor's office, the intelligence services, and so on. Whatever their specific institutional affiliation, all *siloviki* have in common a special type of training that sets them apart from civilians. This training provides the skills, motivation, and mental attitude needed to use force against other people.

The distinguishing feature of enforcement in today's Russia is that it does not necessarily mean enforcement of law. It means enforcement of power and force, regardless of law and quite often against law.

The personnel of each of these enforcement agencies, whether still in active service or retired, form unified groups—often informal but real and potent nonetheless—that can be called brotherhoods or corporations. There is a hierarchy as well as a high level of in-group allegiance in them. Most current and former members of the enforcement agencies form the *siloviki* caste as a distinctive part of society.

At the peak of this caste are current and former secret-police op-

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eratives. First among equals are the FSB agents, followed by agents of the KGB-spinoff Federal Protective Service (FSO) and the Prosecutor-General's Office. Although members of military intelligence (GRU) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) play a role in the caste, they occupy a somewhat lower position in the power hierarchy. It is hard to find anyone among major political decision makers in Russia today with a background in the Interior Ministry or the Ministry of Defense (apart from the GRU): The positions of these ministries and their personnel are clearly subordinate. The real power belongs instead to the operatives and veterans of the secret-police, political-intelligence, and internal law-enforcement bodies. This is important because the professional training, ethical principles, interests, and assumptions (regarding friends, colleagues, and allies, as well as foes) of this key subset of the *siloviki* must form a major object of study for those who wish to understand Russian politics today.

The members of "Siloviki Incorporated" (SI) share a strong sense of allegiance to the group; an attitude of relative flexibility regarding short- and medium-term goals; and rather strict codes of conduct and honor, including the ideas of "always taking care of one's own" and not violating the custom of *omertà* (silence). As one might expect in a group with roots in the secret-police and intelligence services, members place great emphasis on obeying superiors, showing strong loyalty to one another, and preserving strict discipline. There are both formal and informal means of enforcing these norms. Those who violate the code are subject to the harshest forms of punishment, including death.

Those who belong to SI see themselves as an elite. Their training instills in them a feeling of being superior to the rest of populace, of being the rightful "bosses" of everyone else. For those who remain on active duty, their perquisites of office include two items that confer real power in today's Russia: the right to carry and use weapons, and an FSB credential (known as a *vezdehod*) that acts as a *carte blanche* giving its owner the right to enter any place, office, building, or territory whatsoever, public or private.

As in any corporate entity, members have both individual and group interests that do not necessarily coincide. For example, when it comes to who owns the assets that SI has seized—one case involved the expropriation of the Sibneft oil company in 2005—members have been observed arguing ferociously with one another. Yet whatever rifts may open up within SI, the gulf between it and the rest of Russian society remains far wider.

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to power at the end of the 1990s, *siloviki* have spread to posts throughout all the branches of power in Russia. According to a 2006 study by Olga Kryshtanovskaya, the head of the Center for the Study of Elites at the Russian Academy of Sciences, people with a security background filled 77 percent of Russia's top 1,016 governmental positions.[1] Of these, only about a third stated their affiliation

openly. Speaking at the Lubyanka—the Moscow headquarters building that the FSB inherited from the KGB—on "Security Organs Day" (known as "Chekist Day") in December 1999, Putin said that "the mission of the group of FSB officers sent undercover to work in the government is being accomplished successfully." With the state as their base, the *siloviki* have taken over key business and media organizations as well. There are now few areas of Russian life where the SI's long arm fails to reach.

Democracy, Dictatorship, and Something Between

Our second question, about the relationship between the powerholders and everyone else, basically asks what kind of regime Russia has. There are many different ways of classifying political regimes. I prefer to divide them into three principal categories based upon the level of political and other freedoms that the citizens enjoy. The freest kind of regime is *democracy,* the kind that provides the least freedom is *dictatorship,* and the one that lies between them may be called *authoritarianism.*

A telltale indicator is the role played (or not played) by organized, legal political opposition. In a democracy, such opposition will not only have a formal right to exist, but will operate without serious hindrance from the authorities, and will have regular chances to compete peacefully for power and replace incumbents in an orderly, regular manner prescribed by rules made known to all beforehand.

A dictatorship has none of these things. Instead, opposition is forbidden and harshly suppressed; if it comes to power, it will only be by some violent rupture such as a coup or invasion. In an authoritarian regime, finally, organized political opposition can exist, but it will face serious de facto and de jure obstacles and no real path to a peaceful assumption of power. Thus in an authoritarian regime as well as a full-blown dictatorship, fundamental political changeovers are likely to be violent.

Based on this scheme, I would classify the current regime in Russia as an example of a "hard" (fully elaborated) authoritarian regime shading toward becoming a "soft" (somewhat inchoate) dictatorship. For ordinary Russian citizens, this means the presence of some tangible level of personal freedoms, but a nearly complete absence of any substantial political rights, a seriously reduced scope for the exercise of civil liberties, and significant limits to one's personal security. Organized opposition to the regime is nearly nonexistent, and there is no chance for opposition politicians to come to power in a peaceful way. Not only political activists, but also independent journalists, lawyers, and others who might form rallying points for discontent, suffer sporadic terrorization to keep them cowed and living in fear.

The most important characteristic of the current regime in Russia is that real power belongs to no one person, family, party, or ethnic group, but rather to a de facto corporation of secret-police operatives.

Powerful secret-police establishments have been seen before. Russia inherited its own from the old USSR. The SS and its Gestapo in Nazi Germany formed something like a state within a state. So did SAVAK in the Shah's Iran a few decades ago. Yet none of those secret-police organizations possessed supreme political power, and all had political masters from outside their ranks. The regime in today's Russia is therefore unique, since so far there has been no other relatively developed country in which a secret-police organization has captured supreme power.

This atypical character makes the always difficult task of political forecasting harder still. The stability of any regime depends on many factors, including its authorities' readiness to use force to suppress opposition and dissent. Even at times when such measures have not been necessary, the *siloviki* regime has shown itself willing to use them, often leaning toward the side of harshness. This ought to give us some hint of what to expect should the regime face a *real* challenge in the form of economic, social, political, or external upheavals. The thought is not consoling.

Since its outset, the *siloviki* regime has been aggressive. At first it focused on actively destroying centers of independent political, civil, and economic life within Russia. Upon achieving those goals, the regime's aggressive behavior turned outward beyond Russia's borders. At least since the assassination of the former Chechen president Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Doha, Qatar, on 14 February 2004, aggressive behavior by SI in the international arena has become the rule rather than the exception. Over the last five years, the regime has waged ten different "wars" (most of them involving propaganda, intelligence operations, and economic coercion rather than open military force) against neighbors and other foreign nations. The most recent targets have included Ukraine (subjected to a "second gas war" in early 2009), the United States (subjected to a years-long campaign to rouse anti-American sentiment), and most notoriously, Georgia (actually bombed and invaded in 2008).

In addition to their internal psychological need to wage aggressive wars, a rational motive is also driving the *siloviki* to resort to conflict. War furnishes the best opportunities to distract domestic public opinion and destroy the remnants of political and intellectual opposition within Russia itself. An undemocratic regime worried about the prospect of domestic economic, social, and political crises—such as those that now haunt Russia amid recession and falling oil prices—is likely to be pondering further acts of aggression. The note I end on, therefore, is a gloomy one: To me, the probability that Siloviki Incorporated will be launching new wars seems alarmingly high.

NOTES

1. See "Russia: Expert Eyes Security Ties Among Siloviki," 20 December 2006. Available at *www.rferl.org/content/article/1073593.html*.