



The Patronage of *Silovik* Powers and Their Historical Presence in Russian Politics

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Abstract

Russian politics has often been the subject of academia, in an attempt to both understand and predict Russia-policy. I contend that ultimately, the deciding factor that drives Russian politics is not militarism, paranoia or post-Soviet hang-ups. Rather, it is Russia's historical system of political patronage.

Keywords: Russian Politics; International Relations; Putin; Political History

Post-Soviet politics has produced a plethora of literature that has attempted to predict, explain, analyse, and explore the inner workings of the Russian Federation. Often, these endeavours are structured on the centralization of Russian politics under Vladimir Putin. Recent foreign policy measures taken by the Putin administration have distanced the West from Russia and placed the two at odds once again. Among Western concerns is the resurgence of Russia as a military power, and by extension a global one. Beginning with the crushing of Chechen separatists, involvement in Georgia and Ukraine, support for the Assad government, and Putin's often-touted goals of modernising Russia's military, many of the narratives that have sought to explain Russian politics have focused on providing explanations for these activities. These narratives often explore how Russia would seek to return to a position of politico-military prestige, and what the underlying forces are that push it to do so.

The importance of such questions rests in the fact that they dominate external views of Russian politics, and thereby shape the policies taken towards Russia. One of the arguments put forth involves the presence and influence of the siloviki as the defining movement behind Russia's drive to militarization. The term siloviki refers to members of Russia's security establishment who, either through their positions in security institutions or by infiltrating the political system, influence Russian politics to follow a narrowly realist path. For advocates of the siloviki explanation, current politics in the Russian Federation are dominated by its military and security institutions, leaving no distinction between civil and military administrations. This explanation therefore suggests that Russia has transformed from a communist dictatorship to a 'militocracy' (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003).

This essay seeks to explore the extent of silovik influence in Russia. In doing so, I will argue that ultimately, though the siloviki occupy a powerful position in Russian politics, their influence extends only to the political appointments that Putin permits. In other words, civil-military relations are not unbalanced by the security establishment's control of civilian oversight, but rather by the centralization of all policies under hyper-presidentialism. Russia is ruled predominantly under the auspices of the President who, as a veteran of the security establishment himself, provides patronage to the siloviki.

The above hypothesis will be explained through the following: the importance of informal political exchanges as the ultimate deciding factor of power (not a background in security); the siloviki as 'clans' who, as powerful as they are, are too divided to present a united front that shapes Russian politics to a singular purpose; and the siloviki as a political tool of Putin. Realist explanations will outline the motivations of silovik ideology, and path dependence theory and comparative analysis will be utilized to show the historical precedence of the silovik structure's intimate relationship with Russia's rulers. Finally, the idea of the siloviki as the most powerful and defining movement in Russian history will be argued to be a culturalist explanation that only perpetuates Russia as aggressive, backward, and undemocratic- a simplification that has often been resorted to in explaining Russian politics, and falls short.

The system of informal exchange (*blat*) is a powerful force in Russian politics, and in many ways, it is the most important factor in power brokerage in Russia's 'sovereign democracy'. The *blat* system originated in the rationing and shortages that characterized the Soviet system (Ledeneva 1998). Alena Ledeneva proposed that in post-Soviet Russia, the *blat* system of favours, which once stood as the primary means of attaining goods and services that were not state provided, was transformed in order to function under new conditions. Today, *blat* is 'still deployed in the spheres of state education or employment' (Ledeneva: 206). Ledeneva went on to surmise that *blat* was the defining factor related to status and income (209) and will ultimately decide the outcome of the changes that were underway in post-Soviet Russia at the time (214). Putin's administrations would be defined by the same system. Under Putin, the *blat* system has been most visible in the appointment of an informal politburo (Taylor 2011: 60), i.e., his top aides and members of the president's inner circles. Many of the scholars who advocate the existence of a united siloviki power bloc point to this as evidence of their dominance of Russian politics (Taylor 2011:57). However, as Taylor and others have mentioned, this is a misleading narrative.

The composition of Putin's politburo has dynamically changed over time, lending further credence to the idea that the ultimate arbitration of power lies not in the hands of the security establishment, but in the hands of Putin himself. The new politburo is composed of numerous notable siloviki- e.g., individuals like Igor Sechin, Viktor Ivanov, Viktor Cherkersov, and Nikolai Patrishev, to name a few. All these individuals have a background in the security services and/or served with Putin politically in St. Petersburg. Other notable factors that weigh in on the supposed power of the siloviki include the scale of their composition. Though opinions vary, some have placed the number of siloviki in the Russian political and business elite in 2006 at over 78% (Galeotti 2010: 57). However, when considering the nature of these appointments and the importance of non-silovik 'Petersburghers'¹, it is clear that what governs the appointments is not a military or security service background, but rather loyalty to Putin. It is the patrimony of the *blat* system that has seen many siloviki rise to power, not necessarily their own views and backgrounds, although Putin's own position and history in the KGB certainly aids in creating those loyalties.

¹ Referring to the 'Petersburgh Cohort': politicians who followed Putin's rise to power and do not necessarily always have *silovik* ties. Many of these were put on a footing equal to if not higher than Putin; for example, Dimitri Medvedev (Laqueur 2015: 60).

When the conceptualization of the Siloviki as a force in Russian politics first took place in Western academic circles, they were presented as a united, singular entity (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003), and indeed, this would appear to be the case, as the Silovik often function as a clan movement. Firstly, there is the idea of the security service as a life-long club- e.g., 'once a chekist, always a chekist' (Renz: 62). Putin has used this clan mentality to ensure that many major parts of the status apparatus are helmed by individuals who see the president as 'one of us', and in return, Putin has reflected that loyalty by strengthening the political offices of the Silovik clans. For example, Vladimir Ustinov, Igor Sechin's son-in-law, was appointed as the Minister of Justice, a function that gives credence to the rise of Russia's supposed 'telephone justice' system. The Vice President of Gazprombank is the twenty-six-year-old son of Sergei Ivanov. Meanwhile, Boris Gryzlov, a childhood friend of Nikolai Patrushev, was appointed as Speaker of the Duma and was succeeded by Rashid Nurgaliyev, a former KGB agent who had been supervised by Patrushev (Taylor: 60, fig. 2.6). Termed as 'Putin's Siloviki network', these appointments, though they may seem to amount to a takeover of Russian politics, are not indicative of a Silovik power bloc so much as they are a clear depiction of patrimony politics. Furthermore, these Silovik structures do not present a single united front.

There have always been deep rivalries between the numerous security apparatuses of Russia. The KGB/FSB and MVD were always mutually antagonistic, and the Army resented KGB/FSB oversight, monitoring, activities and loyalties, while the KGB/FSB always viewed itself as the elite and most involved of Russia's security institutions (ibid.:67). These rivalries have appeared at the forefront of Russian politics through personal battles within Putin's informal politburo. The schism between Patrushev and Cherkersov, two veteran Siloviki, show that there is far more divergence in Silovik policies than imagined, and as such they cannot be treated as a homogenous group shaping Russian politics with a singular goal. Taylor noted numerous instances of Silovik infighting, and in 2006, a press scandal surrounding the mutilation of an army private was attributed to Sechin and Ustinov's use of the media to attack Ivanov's management of the army. In 2004 and 2006, Viktor Cherkersov (now head of the FSKN²) produced two manifestos calling for Siloviki unity, claiming that the state depended on them, since 'History has arranged that the burden of upholding Russian statehood has to considerable extent fallen to us' (ibid.:36). This was attributed to the ongoing squabbles between Cherkersov and Patrushev. It was a rift that came to boil in 2007, when Patrushev had a leading FSKN officer arrested. Taylor argued that these squabbles were a result of seeking personal power and resources. Inter-Silovik rivalry ultimately only helped to keep Putin in charge as the chief arbiter (Taylor: 66). This rivalry also clearly reflects that Russian politics is not so much a 'militocracy' run by its security instructions, but a patron-client relationship. It is defined by the patronage of Putin, the blat system, and the historical precedent of 'patrimonial rent-seeking' (ibid.: 66), where a barin (landowner) would complete with others to gain the favour of the Tsar, thus acquiring greater lands and more serfs to work them. The blat system, therefore, is deeply rooted in Russian history as a foundation of its political functions.

The appointing of Siloviki to numerous political positions can, understandably, fuel alarmist perspectives; however, it must be considered that Putin has often contradicted the notion of the Siloviki as the dominant political power bloc. For example, twice he has placed non-military members at the head of Russian defense. Sergey Shoygu and Anatoly Serdyukov (another Petersburgher), with no Silovik ties, severely frustrated the defense and security establishments, which saw the appointments as undeserved for anyone who was not 'one of their own' (Renz 2010: 57). Furthermore, Putin has not let the FSB have the same level of power that the KGB had possessed; e.g., he replaced leaders like Patrushev and Cherkesov when they became too ambitious and began infighting. He also rejected the FSB's bid to take

² Federal Drug Control Service of Russia

over the FSO, Russia's presidential guard service. The rejection of the takeover of the body responsible for the president's personal safety speaks volumes about the fact that the security forces perhaps do not hold as much sway as they are often thought to have. Putin's patronage of Siloviki and their subsequent growth is largely a result of his fear of domestic unrest and rival oligarchs³, not a desire to create a 'militocracy', as seen by his use of the Security Forces to arrest and imprison oligarchs and nationalise their assets under separate Silovik leaders. Formal institutions have always been trumped by informal ones in Russian political history, and the blat system remains the supreme form of political power brokerage. As Brian Taylor notes, 'Putin's appointment policies towards toward the power ministries were consistent with the patrimonial nature of Russian politics...where personal loyalty and connection were key (Taylor 2011: 56)'. Ultimately, it is these factors that account for the rise of Silovik personnel in Russian politics. This allows Putin to shape the new generation of security officers and provides a powerful body that he can draw on to legitimize his rule.

A third reason that accounts for the rise of the Siloviki in Russian politics lies in their usefulness to Putin in consolidating his public image and validating his policies. Many arguments touting Silovik dominance point to Russia's aggressive foreign policy as proof of this fact (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003) (AFP 2007). However, further analysis will illustrate that such policies exist as political maneuvers by Putin to validate his government's authority and foreign policy. To this end, the Siloviki and their realist policies, like the war in Georgia, are political tools that Putin has used to consolidate his strong-man image and nationalist support of the Russian people. As Russia sought a return to the status of the Soviet Union and as the Silovik saw the West as a constant threat to the continuity of the nation, the policies of the Kremlin under Putin are indicative of both his political base (the Siloviki) and his legitimization (Russian people).

Following the economic crises of the Yeltsin era and the immense wealth accumulated by a select few oligarchs, Russian opinion swung strongly against these types of 'robber barons' (Whitten 2002: 193-194) (Economist 2004). These opinions were shared by the Siloviki, who espoused a shared contempt for what Russian public opinion had perceived as an elite few who had benefited from the fall of the Soviet Union. One of the main reasons for Putin's early popularity was his mandate against the corrupt oligarchs, which united both public opinion and the support of the security apparatuses under his banner. Through this, public opinion of Putin was galvanized by portraying the oligarchs as profiteers off Russian hardship and the Siloviki (which included himself) as its protectors. Even though the Siloviki and Putin had become the new 'nobility', taking on the old oligarch's roles and wealth (Laqueur 2015: 60), they sold themselves as working not for money but for patriotism and idealism (ibid.).

Additionally, the strongly realist views the Siloviki hold make returning Russia to its former military and political prestige a mandatory agenda. In parallel, the Russian people remain nostalgic about certain aspects of the Soviet-era- primarily, its significant place in the international hierarchy. One of the main reasons for the domestic approval of Putin's foreign policy has been the numerous shocks post-Soviet Russia has endured. The economic crisis, Chechen wars, Balkan incidents (e.g. Kosovo), US invasion of Iraq, Colour Revolutions, and the continuous expansion of NATO have fueled a sense of encirclement and the need to re-assert Russian power (Galeotti: 8). Putin used these shocks to galvanize approval for his foreign policy (e.g., the Ukrainian invasion). These policies are therefore more a result of Putin's power politics, rather than of the influence of the Siloviki, ensuring the people's support for him and energizing the people's 'great power nostalgia'(Krickovic 2014). As Mark Galleoti has stated, though, 'Putin made much of his credentials as a security candidate ... [he] turned

³ Igor Sechin's reception of Yukos assets under the newly nationalized Rosneft, for example.

out to be the insecurity president, deliberately fostering a climate of fear and suspicion to legitimize his nationalist line' (128).

Putin's practice of aggressive foreign policy is strategic, as it synchronizes both the support of one of the state's most powerful lobbies and appeals to populist sentiments. Further to this goal, the Siloviki, and the FSB in particular, have a strong relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. The patronage of the FSB can be seen in an engraving in the Church of Holy Wisdom in Lubyanka Square, which reads: 'restored in August 2001 with zealous help from the FSB' (AFP 2007). Walter Laqueur has argued that this is a result of the church having been completely absorbed and integrated by the GPU/NKVD/KGB and now the FSB, as church appointments were 'decided by these organs' (Laqueur 2015: 50). Church divisions were thereby completely erased, and much like the courts, became a tool of the government, particularly the Siloviki (Laqueur: 75). Although Russians do not necessarily widely identify with the Church theologically, they hold the Orthodox Church as a symbol of the Russian nation.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Therefore, Putin's embrace of the Orthodox Church fulfills a political function: it again puts the Siloviki—and himself by extension—in a noble light. Since the Siloviki have the backing of the church, as their patron, Putin can receive spiritual/religious support for his policies.

Hence, the current rise of the Siloviki has been shown to be a result of Putin's presidency and the centralization under a 'sovereign democracy'. Alternatively, other explanations for the presence and power of the Siloviki apparatuses can be observed by comparing the power of various security groups in Russian history, particularly in the Imperial Age. This analysis will show that the Siloviki have always occupied a privileged position in Russia and have been defined by their loyalty to the state. Thomas Gomart explained that from 'Tsarist times, strategic culture and militarism have had close influence on politics, the concept of civilian control over such forces, some experts argue, has no relevance in Russia' (Gomart 2008: 11). Hence, what is apparent is a path-dependence explanation that normalizes the presence and power of the Siloviki in Russian politics. One of the greatest contributors to this theory is the association in Russia of military power with political prestige. This has much to do with the idealization of the military, where the strength of the security forces has always been equated with strength of state. The historical origins for this are seen throughout Russian history. Russia's loss of the Crimean War was the decisive factor that caused the emancipation of the serfs, leading to a radical change in Russia's course. The Tsars were willing to change traditional economical structures like serfdom if this would translate into better military practice.⁴

This prestige placed on the military extended into Soviet times and continues to do so in the Russian Federation, where membership in the security services remain a symbol of national prestige. Further, notwithstanding that the Siloviki are a tool of Putin, there is also a historical precedent for loyalty to the security structures. As Galeotti stated, there is a 'tradition of Chekists being loyal and devoted to the state' (Galeotti 2010: 130). A historical relationship between the power of the Siloviki in parallel with their entrenchment and devotion to the state can be easily seen. For example, the streletsi corps and Oprichnina under Ivan The Terrible, the Imperial Okhrana, the Cheka, and later the KGB/FSB all have a commonality: loyalty to the state. These bodies did not come into existence based on consultation about the needs of the public, but rather they were formed by a centralized authority for the purpose of power preservation.⁵ This historical precedent, along with the military as a symbol of national prestige, has led some analysts to label Russia as a state founded upon its security services

⁴ Besides industrialization, the use of serf-conscripts was one of the reasons Russia could not defeat England and France, who deployed forces of technologically superior professional soldiers.

⁵ The Okhrana and the feared *oprichniki* were the earliest and purest example of a patronized security institution whose primary purpose was upholding autocratic rule.

(Gomart: 23). Therefore, a path-dependence explanation, particularly when utilized in the context of Russia's past, shows an alternative explanation for the Silovik influence in Russian politics, i.e., that they are an extensional symbol of Russia's power and prestige as well as an integrated part of the state's civil administration. In other words, the Siloviki have always been a force in Russian politics, and therefore Putin's 'militocracy' is no different.

Russian security structures have also benefited from a level of autonomy not found in Western armies/states (Gormat: 24), since, as in the examples previously given, they owe their existence to the patronage of a ruling entity. A historical example of this would be the Russian discovery of the mouth of the Amur River by Cossacks and the independent establishment of Fort Albazin in Manchu Chinese territory. The Cossacks are a glaring example of historical patronage within the Russian military system. Brian Boeck has contended that the many disparate Cossack communities collectively became one of the hammers of the Russian autocracy, crushing insurrections. (Boeck 2009: 188) As a result, they received special privileges from the Tsar, who gave them lands, hunting grounds, tax exemptions, and trade rights, and who eventually standardized them in the Russian military.⁶ The modern equivalent of this can be seen today, e.g., Cossack troops have clashed violently with anti-Putin demonstrators, and Putin has continued the tradition of military patronage via the creation of the National Guard in 2016 and the Registry of National Cossacks in 2005. Hence, Russia has a historical tradition of military institutions that act above civil regulations and are staunchly loyal to the central state.

This path-dependence alternative is particularly interesting, as it not only normalizes the supposed 'rise of the Siloviki' in Russian politics as nothing out of the ordinary, but also shows the clear continuity of patronage as a key factor defining Russian policymaking. Therefore, in considering the prestige historically associated with the security services and their predominantly statist function, the presence of the Siloviki in Russian politics is not a sign of an emerging 'militocracy' helmed by Putin, but rather just another facet of Russian politics historically.

In contrast to the explanations provided here, many arguments that present Russia as a 'militocracy' or a police-state dominated by its intelligence/security structures borrow largely from culturalist explanations. For example, Kryshtanovskaya and White's article Putin's Militocracy, which was in large part responsible for the introduction of 'the Siloviki' as a Western political explanation for Russia, claims that Russians welcomed the idea of a military-security president, even if it involved some curtailment of their new post-communist liberties (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003: 291). Hans Schroder took this further by stating that the majority of the Russian public react positively to strongmen from a military background.⁷ Such narratives are popular, as they fit into the often-adopted Western explanation for Russian actions, i.e., that they are a result of an entirely foreign culture seeking to subvert Western democracy. Hence, publications like The Economist still prefer narratives reflecting the idea of a Russian 'militocracy', as they represent largely Western-oriented, anti-Russian sentiments (AFP 2007). Russia is not a land inherently adverse to democracy; rather, it is a state with political institutions that are markedly different from Western ones and are deeply influenced by their patrimonial history. Due to this history, it is important to look at Russia in view of its various leaders and the politics those personalities have cultivated, rather than perpetuate fear of Russian military threats.

⁶ Going even so far as to forgive their occasional uprisings, which were crushed by other Cossacks that remained loyal to the Tsar (Boeck 2009, 188-207).

⁷ Bettina Renz provides ample evidence through the results of polling by the Levada Centre and Russian Public Opinion Forum, which clearly indicates that this is not the case, and that in fact, Russians view politicians with *silovik* backgrounds with suspicion (Renz 2010, 63-64).

This essay has tackled the question of Russia as a 'militocracy' and the extent of its military/security structure's influence in shaping policy. In doing so, it has presented two main arguments. The first of these posits that the Siloviki are ultimately reliant on Putin and his patronage and are not a united force pushing Russia to pursue aggressive non-democratic policies. Secondly, the Siloviki have been presented as a historical force that has always been deeply embedded in Russian civil service, with post-Soviet Russia being no exception, and that they are certainly not a case of an exceptional new Russian militocracy focused on attacking the West.

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