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[101 on siloviki wars in Russia](#)



Security services in Russia have been fundamentally shaken in recent months. New structures have emerged, influential figures have disappeared into thin air or have been handed promotions. Others are less fortunate - their subordinates get arrested. It seems that “World War II” has broken out among the *siloviki* (if we assume that World War I took place in 2005-2007). It is not so easy to figure out what is going on here: processes that occur within the security services are shrouded from society. Nevertheless, recent realignments of personnel and structures along with high-profile arrests indicate that the regrouping currently taking place among the closest and most trusted confidants of the head of state will be the most pervasive of the Putin era.

Putin’s first revolutionary move [came in the form](#) of the establishment of the National Guard of Russia (*Rosgvardiya*) headed by Putin’s closest ally and “eternal” sentinel Viktor Zolotov. Prior to April 2016, Zolotov spent almost three years as the Commander-in-chief of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). He no doubt used his position to gain insight into “internal affairs” while waiting in anticipation for Putin’s decision to create the Russian Guard. After almost three years (Zolotov joined the MIA in 2013, having vacated the post of the head of the Presidential Security Service (SBP)), Putin had a choice to make: either make Zolotov a minister (he had already been in the Ministry for too long) or translate words into deeds and move the most apt security forces from the MIA to a new service. The second of these two options was selected in light of the fact that the post of Minister of Internal Affairs is far from being the most revered in the

eyes of the *siloviki*.

Thus, a new pinnacle was to emerge on the map of security services. Prior to this, there were two powerful players: the leadership of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the leadership of the Federal Protection Service (FSO), Zolotov's "home soil" in fact (the head of the SBP is, simultaneously, the deputy head of the FSO). Competition between the FSO and FSB harks back to the very start of Putin's rule. The former, [in a coalition](#) with the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN) (Viktor Cherkesov headed it at the time) kept an eye on "Chekists" (the Igor Sechin-Nikolay Patrushev group) while diligently collecting incriminating evidence. The result - the reopening of the [once buried "Three whales" case](#) of 2006 (smuggling of Chinese furniture) involving high-ranking FSB generals; the first powerful blow to the FSB in contemporary Russian history. "Chekists" struck back and Cherkesov's close ally General Alexander Bulbov was arrested soon afterwards (despite his boss' vain attempt to bring about his release, he nevertheless received a three-year suspended sentence for abuse of power in 2010). After a mutual exchange of incriminating evidence between the FSO, which was behind the FSKN, and the FSB, Putin took a Solomonic decision: to weaken the two warring factions.

Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov, an ally of the FSB, was dismissed in 2006. And an Investigative Committee, extraneous to the Prosecutor's Office and headed by Putin's schoolmate Alexander Bastrykin, was established. A new dividing line had been drawn: relentless competition and animosity between the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation has continued unabated ever since. Several FSB generals were dismissed (although rulings were ultimately revised in a few cases). General Viktor Cherkesov abandoned his post in 2008 having [published a home run](#) against "Chekists" in "Kommersant."

Wars between the *siloviki* subsided somewhat during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency and a general weakening was observable. And Medvedev himself began installing his own people in key positions. That is precisely why the *siloviki* began to recover their positions in the first place rather than fight amongst themselves when Putin took up the most elevated position in the state once again.

A new round of battles commenced in 2016, in all likelihood due to the accumulation of a critical mass of influence in many areas of civilian life. The geopolitical crisis and wars in Ukraine and Syria contributed to the restoration of their influence. Anti-western rhetoric has become a pronounced aspect of public policy. Putin has practically taken to ignoring domestic development, aligning himself much closer to the military and the *siloviki*. Key issues related to the development of the country have been raised with increasing frequency during meetings of the Security Council rather than meetings of the government. Power ideology has turned out to be in demand. The logic of war, a wave of conservative sentiments, a plethora of prohibitive initiatives as well as the significant development and growing complexity of the repressive state apparatus; all of this combined has culminated in the *siloviki's* ascent to the vanguard of Russian state policy.

A new wave of competition was inevitably triggered. This time, the original alignment of forces began to change against the backdrop of [Zolotov's "spin-off"](#). The fact of the matter is, when he moved to the MIA in 2013, an outflow of staff from the FSO began, accompanied by a weakening of Yevgeny Murov's position who, up to that point, had seemingly been irreplaceable. Murov turned 70 last year and was about to leave his post and yet, Putin saw no reason to hurry with his decision. The president was halted by a traditional problem: it is not so easy to find a good replacement. Murov put forward his candidates while the FSB "slandered" them and nominated their own. This battle was waged using folders with candidates' files along with files containing incriminating evidence. Instead of getting to the bottom of it, Putin opted to postpone his decision.

The very same FSB helped him arrive at a decision. It already found Murov's occupation of this position somewhat indecent. The FSB collected compromising evidence against Murov himself and his son Andrey who turned out to [have close ties](#) to the business of an entrepreneur from St Petersburg, Sergey Mikhhalchenko (as is usually the case in Russia, Mikhhalchenko's empire was based on work contracts performed by his company on behalf of the FSO and other related companies). Incidentally, Mikhhalchenko was arrested in April. As a result, Murov was fired and the young colonel, Dmitry Kochnev, was appointed head of the FSO. Predictably, he was promoted to the rank of Major General soon after. Incidentally, Kochnev had previously been head of the Presidential Security Service having taken up the post in December 2015. According to Putin's vision, he was supposed to stay there. Oleg Klimentyev, who headed the SBP until December 2015, was earmarked as

Murov's replacement. It remains unclear why Putin reneged. However, what is clear is that the FSO no longer has the same political gravitas: yes men as opposed to "heavy weights" replaced Murov. According to one interpretation, Putin became weary of the excessive influence of "FSO-ists" and the substitutes' bench turned out to be too short. There is no one left from among the faithful to appoint. As a result, the "decline" in the informal status of the FSO was practically compensated for by a boost of the powers of the new service - the National Guard of Russia.

The FSB looked on with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it was a provisional victory over the FSO. Murov was gone, the case against Mikhhalchenko, who is very much part of his circle, was well on its way. Searches were even [carried out](#) at the place of the head of the Federal Customs Service Andrey Belyanin and Mikhhalchenko's case is said [to be linked](#). The expansion of the FSB affects governors, the SKR and the Ministry of Culture - no one is safe. However, on the other hand, Zolotov's position has been strengthened and his strong ties with the FSO and, most importantly, the president remain intact. Besides, he has his own security service now.

These events seemingly constitute a, thus far, unfinished chapter in the confrontation between the FSB and the National Guard of Russia: the FSB itself is now being shaken as competition between the Economic Security Service (SEB) and Internal Security Department (USB) intensifies. The SEB [accused](#) the USB of exceeding its authority in the media and arrested Nikita Belykh without the president's assent. Subsequently, the USB started to "snoop around" the subordinates of the head of the SEB for allegedly "protecting" smugglers of contraband resulting in the [cleansing of the SEB](#): influential heads of departments were fired and Sergey Korolev, the former head of the USB, became the new head of the SEB.

It was precisely the new leadership of the SEB which "bullied" [subordinates](#) of Alexander Bastrykin, the head of the SKR, via connections within the friendly "M" department of the SEB. The "Chekists" accused SKR generals of bribery in connection with the release of associates of the mafia boss known as "Young Shakro". Bastrykin refrained from standing up for his subordinates since the similar experience of the abovementioned Viktor Cherkesov perhaps remained too fresh in his memory. Viktor Cherkesov, having promised to fight corruption regardless of rank and merit in 2007, nevertheless, opted to stand up to his attackers from the FSB. He did not remain in office for very long. Moreover, he didn't stay in the civil service for long, disappearing into oblivion a few years later (he did not even make it to the State Duma as a member of the ruling party and was forced to ask for membership in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)). Nobody even needs him in the KPRF now. Having realized that he should not count on Putin, Bastrykin turned in his people and complied with the FSB.

All of this seemingly amounts to an incredible and never-ending *Santa Barbara*; some stick together against others, spin intrigues, bug each other's offices and turn each other in. However, several tendencies can be observed: First of all, structures which continue to be Putin's personal support are dramatically gaining political momentum, namely the FSB and the National Guard of Russia. Secondly, structures managed by the heads of "the second tier" become weaker; the MIA is now much weaker (despite being joined by the FSKN and the Federal Migration Service (FMS)) and so is the FSO (although new bosses will not pull any punches the moment they have gained political experience). Thirdly, there are casualties among those in the "third tier"; the SKR is "eaten up" by the "Chekists" despite personal affinity between Bastrykin and Putin (apparently friendship has many faces and there are quite a number of bones to pick with the head of the SKR). The FSKN, headed by the once mighty Viktor Ivanov, is a thing of the past as is the FMS which only has resident registration offices left.

These tendencies are not only dangerous for a society suffering from the torrent of "security initiatives," they are dangerous for Putin, too. The *siloviki* are too numerous and they have too much power and incriminating evidence to hand. When you come to power surrounded by a dozen adherents, everything in your group appears under control. However, when these dozen adherents succumb to armies of many thousands and some of the "old-timers" disappear into thin air (Viktor Cherkesov, Yevgeny Murov or the team of Nikolay Patrushev), they are replaced by a pack of uncontrolled, angry, hungry, unscrupulous, young "wolves" who have no loyalty towards you. They understand only too well that today there is Putin but tomorrow he may be gone. The *siloviki* will start living their own lives as part of a separate, very privileged caste which is fragmented but enjoys a monopoly on the use of violence. And in this new life, for Putin, it will prove increasingly difficult to find someone who's got his back.

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