

## **Putin's Inner Circle Shows Its Muscle:**

### **A small group controls Russia**

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In what passed for an election campaign, Vladimir Putin appeared in uniform on the deck of a ballistic missile submarine to observe what was billed as the largest military exercises in 20 years. The fact that a test missile launch failed in his presence went unreported by the Russian television media, which is again firmly controlled by the Kremlin.

A few days earlier, on Feb. 13, a prominent exiled leader of the Chechen rebels fighting Russian rule was blown up in his SUV in Qatar. A couple of weeks later, two agents of the Russian special services were arrested by Qatar authorities.

These two events are a small window into the triumph of a small circle of men who hold power in Russia today. Russians call them *siloviki*, a word that literally means people of power. It refers to the military and the law enforcement agencies, including most of all the infamous KGB and its successor, the Federal Security Service.

When Putin was re-elected a week ago – an event that resembled a coronation more than an election – it marked the consolidation of rule by the *siloviki*.

Putin is proud of his own long career in the KGB. And he has surrounded himself with his former comrades. According to a recent study by a Russian sociologist, half the Kremlin inner circle are *siloviki*. Four of the seven men appointed to rule Russia's vast regions are also of this ilk, as are 70 percent of their staff. Even the new prime minister, praised by some as an economic reformer, began his career 30 years ago as a secret KGB agent, Russian analysts say.

Western governments make noises now about the shrinking of democracy in Russia. But they console themselves, as do some Russian liberals, by pointing to market reforms and the opportunities eagerly pursued by Western business to make money. Some also praise cooperation in combating Islamist terror. Perhaps a little order in often chaotic and lawless Russian is not such a bad thing, they say.

This is wishful thinking. What ever short-term benefits come from Putin's order are far outweighed by the drift into authoritarianism. That is not only bad for democracy; it also undermines the integration of Russia into Europe, the best guarantee that it will not find itself at odds with the West again sometime down the road.

Putin casts himself in the tradition of Russian modernizers such as Peter the Great, who combined Western technology with a strong Russian state to create a Great Russia that could take its proper place in the world. The *siloviki* are men who lament the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Putin did in a Feb. 12 speech calling it a "national tragedy on an enormous scale" in which "only the elites and nationalists of the republics gained."

Those who broke free from the Soviet empire know what those words mean. "Putin wants two things," Archil Gegeshidze, the former national security adviser to the Georgian president, told me. "The first is very strict order in the country, at any expense. The second is to restore the 'near abroad,' as the Russians call the former Soviet republics, as a bastion of Russian influence."

Georgia is particularly sensitive to this yearning. The Caucasian republic has built close ties to the West, to the irritation of Moscow, which maintains two military bases in Georgia and drags its feet on a promise to close them down. The election of a new Georgian government, led by an American-educated reformer, has set Russian teeth on edge.

"Moscow does not want democracy in its neighborhood," Gegeshidze explains, "because then the process of integration into the West will accelerate." Russia's attempt to maintain its influence is better served, he says, by corrupt governments and less democracy.

Putin is a pragmatist. He avoids confrontations that he cannot win. That allows some in the West to underestimate what the triumph of the *siloviki* really means. They do so at their peril.