

Translation: Vladimir Pribylovsky on “Phantom Tandem, Real Triumvirate and the Kremlin Clan Wars” in *ВЛАСТЬ-2010: 60 биографий*

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The Triumvirate and the First Ten

According to the official version, Russia is a democratic country, consensually governed by the “tandem” of lawfully elected President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. The semi-official version says that the two halves of the “tandem” are in fact equal: since Putin is older and more experienced, he is also more “equal” and more important than his protégé in the Presidency.

The second account is closer to the real state of affairs, but it’s inaccurate even so. The pinnacle of power isn’t occupied by a “tandem” or duumvirate, but by a triumvirate composed of Putin, Sechin and Medvedev. The President isn’t even the second man in the hierarchy, but only the third. Although some politologists rank Medvedev fourth (after Viktor Ivanov) or even fifth (after Sergey Naryshkin, or Aleksandr Bortnikov, or Vladislav Surkov, or even Roman Abramovich), these are sensationalist exaggerations.

The real hierarchy and functions of Russia’s highest bureaucrats have no relation to their nominal positions. Vladimir Putin is called Prime Minister, but in reality he’s the Sovereign, our Tsar-Batyushka – while not a sole autocrat or absolute monarch, his power is unconstitutional; and though constrained, it is not by the constitution or the laws, but by corporate-clique traditions (not dissimilar from mafia “understandings”), backstage agreements with shadowy lobbies, and family, friend and administrative connections. Furthermore, not only is Putin a Tsar, he is also his own Minister of Foreign Affairs (the nominal minister, Sergey Lavrov, is nothing more than an advisor on foreign policy).

Though Igor Sechin is called the Deputy Prime Minister, it is he who is in fact the “First Minister”. He’s not quite the head of government (as not all Ministers are subject to him – several answer directly to the Sovereign), but he’s a first amongst equals nonetheless. He holds sway over vast swathes of the Russian economy (with the exception of finance) and the security organs answer to him.

On paper, Dmitry Medvedev is the President and head of stat, but in reality he’s sooner a sort of Deputy Prime Minister on a wide range of issues. Though preeminent in his domain, the legislative sector, he is but an advisor to the Sovereign on cadre questions, and not even the most influential – that honor goes to Viktor Ivanov, and maybe even Sergey Sobyenin has more influence on the appointments of governors than the President who signs to confirm them.

The responsibilities of FSB director Aleksandr Bortnikov are similar to his job description. Though he is formally subordinated to President Medvedev, his real managers are Putin and Sechin.

Although Viktor Ivanov is officially the director of the Federal Anti-Narcotics Agency, no matter the name of his official position in the last 15 years, he was and remains Putin's main advisor on cadre selection. Furthermore, the Federal Anti-Narcotics Agency is really the "second KGB" (the "first KGB" is Bortnikov's FSB). This "second KGB" became necessary after the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which had balanced the KGB during the Soviet era, fell under FSB control during Putin's reign. Control of the MVD is exercised by the Petersburg – Karelia clan of Patrushev and Nurgaliev.

Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Presidential Administration, should theoretically work to fulfill the President's will. However, Naryshkin, Putin's classmate in the KGB Higher School, is actually Medvedev's "supervisor" on behalf of the Sovereign, Putin.

Vladislav Surkov is officially the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, but is also informally responsible for the regime's ideology. He holds an unofficial position that is impossible in a democratic state – Minister of Parliament and Political Parties.

The Minister of Finance Aleksey Kudrin, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov (answers on foreign economic policy) and Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Sobyenin (head of the Administration of the Russian President) also figure in the first ten of the administrative-economic oligarchy that rules Russia.

A Note on Oligarchy

An oligarchy is the collective authoritarianism of the propertied class. The single most propertied class in Russia is the higher bureaucracy, the nomenklatura. Directly (through management of state property) or indirectly (through front men, wives, children, cousins, nephews, etc) the oligarchic nomenklatura controls virtually the entire Russian economy. Their leading members are magnates of global stature – Putin in oil/gas and finance, Medvedev in paper and pulp, Sechin in oil, Sobyenin in natural gas, Shuvalov in finance, Surkov in food products, etc. This pattern is reproduced amidst the wider ranks of the regional oligarchies.

Clans, Clienteles and Coalitions

An oligarchy is never united – it is always fragmented into clans, groupings and clienteleles waging civil war, as parts of temporary or more-or-less continuous coalitions. Today the main struggle is between two coalitions of administrative-economic clans, Sechin's and Medvedev's. The coalition centered around Sechin wants to remove Medvedev and his supporters from power and supports a third term for Putin after the 2012 elections.

In direct opposition, the Medvedev coalition aims to displace Sechin and his allies, reelect Medvedev in 2012, and transform the triumvirate into a duumvirate with Medvedev playing a more equal role in it. However, they are not much interested in Putin's dismissal, though it is possible that for some of them it is a distant goal.

The foundation of the Sechin coalition is the union of two groups of St.-Petersburg Chekists: Sechin's own clan and the group of Viktor Ivanov and Nikolay Patrushev (secretary of the Security Council and former head of the FSB), reinforced by a smattering of smaller clans and clienteleles. Prominent figures in the Sechin clan include his protégé in the FSB Aleksandr Bortnikov, the Presidential Envoy to the

Southern Federal District Vladimir Ustinov (Sechin's son-in-law), former Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov (current First Deputy Prime Minister) and Mikhail Fradkov (current head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR), Minister of Defense Aleksandr Serdyukov, the President of Rosneft Sergey Bogdanchikov and the CEO of Vneshtorgbank Andrey Kostin.

The Ivanov – Patrushev group includes Speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov, deputy head of the Federal Anti-Narcotics Agency Oleg Safonov and Minister of Internal Affairs Rashid Nurgaliev. This group splits further into several sub-groups and clienteles, the more noticeable of which include the Petersburg – Karelia Chekists (Patrushev – Nurgaliev) and the Petersburg – Afghan Chekists of Viktor Ivanov (his fellow servicemen on Afghanistan). The Sechin coalition also draws in the clienteles of Sergey Naryshkin and Aleksandr Bastrykin (Chairman of the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General and Putin's classmate from the Law Department of Leningrad State University). Another of Putin's friends, Sergey Chemezov, is also part of Sechin's coalition, with his extensive clientele of enterprise directors within the state corporation Russian Technologies, and several governors.

Medvedev's coalition is composed of the so-called "Petersburg lawyers" (mostly Medvedev's classmates from the Law Faculty of Leningrad State University), the "Petersburg economists", the "Petersburg communicationists", as well as Viktor Cherkesov's group. The most influential of the "Petersburg lawyers" is Medvedev's friend and former classmate, head of the Control Department of the Presidential Administration Konstantin Chuychenko. This group also includes the chairman of the Supreme Court of Arbitration and Medvedev's lifelong friend Anton Ivanov, the Presidential Envoy to the Urals Federal District Nikolai Vinichenko, a few other lower-ranked classmates, Deputy Prime Minister and head of preparations for the Sochi Olympics Dmitry Kozak, Minister of Justice Aleksandr Kononov, and Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika (also a lawyer, though of Siberian origins).

Aleksey Kudrin leads the "Petersburg economists", which also include Central Bank chairman Sergey Ignatyev, his first deputy Aleksey Ulyukaev, Minister of State Property Elvira Nabiullina, Director General of the state corporation Rosnano Anatoly Chubais, and advisor to the President Arkadiy Dvorkovich.

The "Petersburg communicationists" are led by Presidential advisor Leonid Reiman and his clientele (in contrast to a clan or group, which have some relatively equal personages, a clientele exhibits a more "vertical" nature: a master and his servants, the manager and his subordinates). Cherkesov's group is also a clientele, though less so than Reiman's because it includes the head of the President's personal security service Viktor Zolotov and, perhaps, Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov.

Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov ("Igor Ivanovich Not Really" – as opposed to Sechin, who's "Igor Ivanovich The Real Deal") and head of Medvedev's Press Service Natalia Timakova are also part of Medvedev's coalition. Its other supporters include the moneybags Roman Abramovich and Alisher Usmanov, as well as former Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Norilsk Nickel Aleksandr Voloshin. It is possible to consider these figures as another grouping in Medvedev's coalition, "Voloshin's group". Of the newly appointed regional leaders, Nikita Belykh and Dmitry Mezentsev are supporters of Medvedev and his modernization initiative.

In addition to the two main coalitions there exist individuals and groups which haven't chosen sides, support a neutral position, or prefer to deal with Putin directly. These include the group of "Petersburg physicists" (the Kovalchuk family and the brothers Fursenko) and the "Petersburg Orthodox Chekists" (President of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin, the Presidential Envoy to the Central Federal District Georgiy Poltavchenko, and the Head of the Presidential Property Management Department Vladimir Kozhin). These groups are historically closely tied both with each other (through the St.-Petersburg Association of Joint Ventures and "Russia" Bank) and with Putin (through the "Ozero" dacha co-op).

Vladislav Surkov and his clientele also orientate themselves directly to Putin, feeding off the management of the Presidential Administration's internal policy. Most governors – both old hands and new appointees (e.g., the new Governor of Pskov Oblast Andrey Turchak and the new President of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov) – prefer to simultaneously show fealty to Putin, loyalty to Medvedev and boundless respect for Sechin.

Though there undoubtedly exist ideological differences between the Kremlin clans, they are not the building blocks of their coalitions. It is usually considered that Medvedev's people (especially Kudrin's group) profess economic liberalism, whereas Sechin's clan are proponents of dirigisme. However, the disagreement seems more theoretical than anything. In practice, and regardless of their economic views, bureaucrats support "liberalism" towards companies under their thumb, while arguing for "dirigisme" towards enterprises connected to their opponents within the apparatus.

The majority of Medvedev's clan are relative Westernizers and moderate imperialists. In contrast, Sechin favors an alliance with China against the West, and the majority of his supporters are hawkish imperialists in their attitudes towards the former Soviet republics. That said, the views of Cherkesov, especially in foreign policy, are little different from those of his bitter enemies amongst the Sechin clan (e.g., the news group Rosbalt, which they control, beat the war drum for a march on Tbilisi in August 2008).

Though he is a relative Westernizer and fairly liberal in his internal convictions, Surkov is adamantly opposed to even the minimal modernizing reforms in the sphere of ideology and politics suggested by Medvedev's liberal advisors from the Institute of Contemporary Development, INSOR, patronized by Timakova and financed by Reiman. Though the "Orthodox Chekists" Yakunin and Poltavchenko might sing the Cross and Russian power to the skies, and advocate a strategic blockade of America in conjunction with the Arabs-Muslims, this does not stop them from maintaining a close alliance with the Kovalchuks (moderate Westernizers, and rather indifferent to both Orthodoxy and the Arabs-Muslims) in the interests of remaining competitive in economic and internal political intrigues.

Putin is Above the Fray

Putin remains above the struggle between the two oligarchic-nomenklatura coalitions (the rivalry between which he partly organized himself) and exploits all the political advantages of this state of affairs. Historically, he is closer to the Sechin clan, especially since one of the leaders of this coalition, Viktor Ivanov, is one of his closest friends. However, on economic questions (and personally) Putin completely trusts in Kudrin, and maintains friendly relations with him; furthermore, the appointment of

Medvedev as a successor would have been impossible without a certain degree of trust – greater, in any case, than towards any of his former colleagues in the KGB. No doubt Putin was afraid of bestowing the Presidential mantle onto any of them even for a short time – regardless of all the vaunted “friendship” and “brotherhood” in the intelligence services.

In his cultural and civilizational views, Putin is a Westernizer (like Kudrin or Medvedev), but has only distaste for Western-style democracy (like Sechin, Patrushev, Viktor Ivanov). In matters of foreign policy he usually occupies a middle line between Kremlin Westernizers and anti-Westernizers, hawks and moderates, but it remains unclear whether his middle of the road attitude comes from listening to opposing sides of the foreign policy debate or is a product of his own quirks and oscillations.

The Sacred Cow

There are several reasons preventing the Medvedev clan from moving against Putin (and its anti-Putin minority from speaking out against Putin openly). First, it’s simply dangerous – for the future, for business, even life and limb. Second, many members of Medvedev’s coalition feel themselves quite comfortable with Putin – some of them are even closer to Putin, than they are to Medvedev (e.g. Kudrin): it is Sechin who makes their lives hard, not Putin. Third, they aren’t sure that they would be able to keep the Chekists and other assorted siloviks in check without Putin (as of now the Army is quiet and the generals don’t stick their noses into politics, but this will not necessarily be the case forever). Fourth, they are all either unknown to ordinary Russians (from Chuychenko to Shuvalov), or unpopular (Chubais, to a lesser extent Kudrin), and they fear that without Putin, not only would they be unable to control the Chekists, but also the Russian people.

Fifth, and finally, some of them (e.g., Chubais, Kudrin, Shuvalov) understand, that they have no long-term interests binding them to Medvedev, and rightly fear that if there were neither Sechin nor Putin, nothing would stop Medvedev from scapegoating them should the need arise. Nonetheless, in Medvedev’s circle – and especially in that “circle’s circles” – there does exist a dissatisfaction with Putin and a hidden desire to deprive him of power. This dissatisfaction is more or less evidenced in the writings of Medvedev’s experts in INSOR, the speeches of official human rights activists from the Presidential Council on Developing Civil Society, and in the publications of paper and electronic media under the control of Voloshin and Usmanov.

That said, however, it isn’t clear what Medvedev himself wants: to defeat Sechin and ascend to second place in a duumvirate, or to one day become the first and only Tsar himself. It’s possible that Medvedev himself doesn’t quite know yet; in any case, he is still far from successful in his struggle for second place in the real Kremlin hierarchy.