Beyond Putin? Deciphering power in Russia

The end of Putin (again)?

Since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, ‘Putinology’ has dominated the mainstream Western discussion about Russia. It has become the central pillar of what appears as a form of ‘neo-Kremlinology’, as observers seek to interpret subtle and often ambiguous indications of the relative influence of those who are close to Putin and thus on decision-making, and seek to parse rumours of firings and appointments to attempt to divine ‘who is up and who is down’, ‘cracks in Kremlin unity’, power struggles and the implications of ‘clan feuding’. There was much speculation during the war in Ukraine, for instance, about the shrinking inner circle of advisors to Putin and the rising influence of ‘hardliners’. Rumours also circulated for months about the firing of Minister of the Interior Vladimir Kolokoltsev, and his replacement by First Deputy Minister of the Interior Viktor Zolotov.1

Indeed, the focus on Putin has become ever more intense as officials and observers have attempted on one hand to divine what it is that Putin ‘really wants’ and ‘really thinks’, or on the other, increasingly painted him as isolated from the wider Russian political landscape, whether from the population or from the political elite, or both. This has evolved into a heightened focus on the personalised nature of Russian power, and it has provided a platform for much speculation about the increasing narrowness of Putin’s advisory circle, the inherent instability of ‘Putin’s’ system and consequently (again) about the Putin era coming to an end and a possible post-Putin era.2 Illustrative of the wider discussion, one observer suggested that the murder of Boris Nemtsov in February 2015, followed by the president’s disappearance from the public eye for a few days in March 2015, demonstrated that Putin, ‘known for his steely-eyed resolve in previous crises is losing control, can’t give his
entourage clear orders as to how to respond and is having problems pacifying the Kremlin’s warring clans’. The ‘spell of his machismo and invincibility has been ended’, she continued, and ‘doubt about his fitness to rule whether he controls the levers of power or not, will continue to spread’.3

Rumours, many of which originated from previously unknown and somewhat dubious sources, quickly spread both about Putin himself, suggesting that he had disappeared from view because he had died, or been incapacitated by a stroke. And there was speculation about friction between power groups in the wake of the murder of Boris Nemtsov, about the possibility of a coup – led, some suggested, by Secretary of the Security Council and former director of the FSB Nikolai Patrushev, and about the death of another senior figure, Viktor Zolotov, First Deputy Minister of the Interior.

This ‘neo-Kremlinology’ is partly a response to the obscurity of decision-making in Russia and the resulting limit to what we can know about the inner-functioning of politics, and its central pillar, ‘Putinology’, reflects the undoubted centrality of Putin to the current Russian political landscape. But it increasingly distorts our understanding of Russian political life and, by relying on dubious sources, speculation and assertion, generates much additional noise that distracts and obstructs our understanding of how Russia works. As noted above, one example of this was a Pentagon-supported study from 2008 was published in early 2015 suggesting that Putin suffered a form of autism. It suggested that ‘his movement patterns and micro-expressions analysed on open source video, so clearly reveals that the Russian president carries a neurological abnormality, a profound behavioural challenge identified by leading neurologists as Asperger’s Syndrome, an autistic disorder which affects all of his decisions’.4 Leaning aside such psychological ‘diagnoses’ that occasionally emerge, it facilitates, as one observer has suggested, a discussion that is both hysterical and imprecise. Not only has it narrowed attention to only very specific aspects of the wider Russian political landscape, but, confusing suggestion and insinuation with evidence, it often asserts changes in the leadership team around Putin, and a significant change in Russian politics away from a more team-based, consensual style politics – the ‘Collective Putin’ – towards a more autocratic political personalisation that depicts the regime as increasingly brittle.

‘Putinology’ is thus entrenching an analytical context in which various assumptions are made about how ‘Putin’s Russia’ and
how it approaches its international actions. The central thread is that it is Putin alone who drives the current Russian stance, with the implication that without him those Russian policies that run counter to Western interests can be reversed – and even that Russia itself will change. Putin is seen as the system, therefore, and the system as Putin, a point observers reinforce by quoting Vyacheslav Volodin, first deputy head of the presidential administration, who, in a speech at the Valdai International Discussion Group in 2014, suggested that ‘there is no Russia without Putin’.5

Thus the possibility of regime change in Russia has long been a focus of Western analysis: in 2005, observers were warning that popular discontent about hardline policies, corruption and the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine would lead to a second Russian revolution and Putin being forced from office.6 But it has increasingly emerged as a central theme in the Western discussion about Russia – whether a ‘Maidan’ could happen in Russia, because Western sanctions create conditions in which the Russian population goes to the streets to demand change,7 or whether the sanctions would create the conditions for a ‘palace coup’ in which Putin would be removed by senior figures within the leadership. By late 2014 and early 2015 the theme of a coup had become a frequent, even monthly, feature of the Western discussion about Russia, providing scope for a host of spurious analogies with Russian and Soviet history, and sensational but vague speculation that Putin was under threat from various hardliners, be they the security services or the military.8

In this way, it might be said to have replaced the question ‘when would the tandem arrangement break up?’ as the central analytical focus for debate. At the same time, as one Western observer has suggested, such an approach is neither new nor confined to Russia – it has featured in discussions about Iraq, Syria, Libya, North Korea and even Ukraine, in which the leader’s departure not only leads to a ‘clean slate’, but is part of a progressive revolution creating stability.9

This chapter first sketches out an overview of the various understandings of the Russian political landscape, framing the considerable long-term continuity in post-Cold War Russian politics. It then turns to assess the vertical of power, framing it as a cascade from the core leadership team at the top, to ‘federal locomotives’, to those tasked with management. Finally, it looks at some of those who appear to be emerging figures, as managers and as players in the ‘reset’.
The ‘Collective Putin’: depictions of the Russian political landscape

Observers have used various models to describe the broader picture of Russian political life. Two of the most prominent are those that, first, portray the ‘dual state’, and, second, the balance between so-called ‘siloviki’ (those in the security and intelligence services, military and interior ministry) and ‘liberals’. Both of these approaches relate the discussion to the evolution and limits of Russian democracy. The first suggests that a ‘dual order’ has emerged which combines formal structures of state and informal rules, a constitutional order buttressed by an administrative regime – the hybrid result being a combination of democratic institutions but authoritarian practices. The regime operates through informal networks that criss-cross both government positions and those in big business, and often subverts the constitutional order – but is also constrained by it.10

The relative balance of power between ‘siloviki’ and ‘liberals’ has been the subject of much elaboration and debate since Putin’s first term. A particular theme has been the roles and influence of figures with a security/armed forces background, a ‘militarisation’ of society, as observers have debated their role and dominance of the system – and how that influence is balanced by those of a more liberal or technocratic background. Again, this has reflected a debate about whether this was a deliberate creation of a police state mechanism into a declarative democracy, and thus an expression of an increasingly authoritarian political approach under Putin’s leadership, even a shift from an oligarchy to a ‘KGB’ or ‘mafia-state’, in effect creating what some have called a ‘militocracy paradigm’ as the main framework for understanding Russian politics which underpins the de-democratisation thesis.11

Elaborating on this broad canvas of balances between formal structures and informal rules, and ‘siloviki’ and ‘liberal-technocrats’, depictions of the Russian political landscape have featured more detailed analysis of the groups and factions involved, and the way they interact. Some have suggested that the president works publicly with two teams of officials, the government and the permanent members of the Security Council, who meet to take strategic decisions, and a third, smaller and informal ‘tea-drinking’ group of personal friends.12 This interaction is underpinned by informal associations or networks of clans.13

These ‘clans’, networks and groups are often depicted as in constant tension and rivalry for resources, arbitrated by Putin.
Observers have proposed numerous models for these networks. The ‘Kremlin Towers’ model, offered by Vladimir Pribylovsky, divides the leadership team into nine clans, mostly based on a St Petersburg affiliation, such as the ‘St Petersburg lawyers’, ‘St Petersburg Chekists’ (security services), ‘St Petersburg economists’, ‘Orthodox Chekists’, and so on. The clans are grouped on business, kinship and career relationships, are each led by the most influential and powerful figures, and are composed of a hierarchical structure of people at different levels of government and business.\(^\text{14}\) The ‘Solar system’ or ‘Planets’ model depicts relationships as they relate to Putin, who is the ‘sun’ at the core of the system. He is surrounded by three circles of planets – the inner circle or partners, the intermediate circle, or junior partners, and the outer circle, or loyal servants. The framework is more flexible as the position of the various planets can evolve, moving closer to or further from the core.\(^\text{15}\)

A third approach, advanced by Evgeniy Minchenko, a Russian political consultant, proposes a ‘Politburo 2.0’ model, which represents an informal collective leadership based on three tiers. At the core, there is a ‘full membership’ of some 10 to 12 individuals who are leading figures in the security services, government and business. This then ripples out on a scale of some 50 other ‘candidate members’, again drawn not only from the power/security services, politics, big business and the government/administration, but also party politics and regional authorities, and then, beyond that, a lower, larger level of ‘central committee members’. This grouping also evolves. When Minchenko published his ‘Politburo 2.0’ in 2010, there were 11 full members. By 2012, it had shrunk to nine full members, as Alexei Kudrin and Sergei Naryshkin dropped down into the ‘Candidate members’ group. In the ‘Post Crimea’ Politburo report of 2014, the full member group had again grown to 11 as Sergei Chemezov and Arkady Rotenburg had been added.\(^\text{16}\)

Despite their (slight) variations, these models offer a broad consensus about who are the key figures in the leadership team. They include Sergei Ivanov, Dmitri Medvedev, Nikolai Patrushev, Igor Sechin, Yuri Kovalchuk, Gennadiy Timchenko, Sergei Sobyanin, Vyacheslav Volodin, Sergei Shoigu, Arkadiy Rotenberg and Sergei Chemezov. Among the 50 or so at the next level are Alexei Kudrin, Vladislav Surkov, Sergei Naryshkin, Dmitri Kozak, German Gref, Igor Shuvalov, Elvira Nabiullina, Sergei Lavrov, Alexander Bastrykin, Viktor Zolotov, Mikhail Fradkov, Alexei Miller, Anatoliy Chubais, Oleg Deripaska, Mikhail Fridman, Yuri Trutnev, Alexander
Khloponin and the senior systemic opposition figures such as Sergei Mironov and Gennadiy Zyuganov. Against this background, several important related points stand out about Russian political life. The first is that, despite well-publicised (though sometimes exaggerated) tensions and rivalries between factions, the factions belong to one wider team with vested interests in the continuation of the current system. To be sure, there are those who are rivals for power and resources, and those who espouse different priorities or means of achieving goals. Nevertheless, despite labels such as ‘siloviki’ and ‘liberals’, the groups’ wider political orientations do not differ over ultimate goals: as some observers have noted, there is ‘very little opposition’ in either group to ‘a “strong” or even “authoritarian” state’; and some, while labeled ‘liberal’ were fulfilling a role – if they had been given a role that was more conservative, then they would have acted as conservatives. The emphasis, therefore, is overall on a collective leadership team with Putin acting as the central figure as arbitrator between these groups, and this collective serves to co-opt and balance competing groups into a whole. When Putin first came to power in 1999/2000, he was initially considered to have no team, though by 2001 Russian media awarded the title of politician of the year to the ‘Collective Putin’. Since 2000, and particularly during the mid-to-late 2000s, Putin (and Medvedev) have overseen largely joint appointments to senior positions of personnel with whom they have long and strong connections and who have proved themselves. The leadership team is built on two main pillars. One pillar consists of those in the core group who in the main are the friends, classmates and colleagues of Vladimir Putin (and Dmitri Medvedev), and have worked together since the early-to-mid 1990s. As one observer put it, ‘it is not even just St Petersburges, but classmates and personal friends and acquaintances of the president and prime minister who occupy all the key positions in the country’. The other pillar consists of those professional bureaucrats and a regional elite who have risen through the ranks in the government bureaucracy and party politics and become part of the leadership team. Two examples are Sergei Lavrov, Russian ambassador to the UN 1994–2004 and since then Foreign Minister (and member of the Security Council), and Sergei Shoigu, Minister for Emergency Situations from 1991 to 2012, then regional governor of Moscow Region, before replacing Anatoliy Serdyukov as Minister of Defence in 2012, also with a position in the Security Council. Shoigu, for
years the only minister who registered in popularity polls, has had a long career in politics, also: in 1999, he headed the Unity party list, and subsequently becoming the leader of UR until 2005. The leadership team is thus woven into the longer-term political landscape of Russia, and woven together in formal structures such as the presidential administration, the Security Council, the government, presidential advisory councils and big business.

Second, leading on from this, there has been considerable long-term stability and continuity in this leadership team. Most of the senior figures from both pillars of the team have occupied senior positions since the late 1990s. Indeed, it is important to remember that although Putin has instigated a number of changes, he inherited much of the structure of the system that he now leads; and a number of prominent figures such as Alexander Voloshin, Anatoliy Chubais, ‘systemic’ opposition figures Gennadiy Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, as well as Dmitry Rogozin and Sergei Shoigu held senior positions in Russian political, administrative and business life before Putin even came to Moscow.

This reflects a number of important points about Russian politics, including the emphasis placed on broader stability, teams and loyalty, and the unwillingness of the leadership to fire people or conduct major ‘reshuffles’. Changes have been limited to ‘rotations’, which broadly constitute moving the same senior figures to different positions: despite even serious, high-profile scandals, senior figures are rarely scapegoated or fired. When he was prime minister, Putin published an article entitled ‘why it is difficult to fire someone’, in which he stated that even those who make mistakes should not simply be punished by being fired, and that it is not always clear whether the accusations being made in favour of someone being fired are merely political intrigue – since a constant theme of politics is the clash of interests. He also notes that he is convinced that constant, rushed changes will not make things better, either for getting things done, or for the people involved, since those who replace them will be much the same (if not worse). The task, therefore, is to create a working environment and motivate people to do their work – and let them get on with it, rather than indulge in firings. Interestingly, he suggests that the time when it is appropriate to fire someone is when they suggest that a task set for them is ‘impossible’.

This is not to say that the leadership team has not evolved over time, including, on very rare occasions, the eviction of senior figures from the inner circle, though these are very few in number. One is
Viktor Cherkesov, a graduate of the law department of Leningrad State University and subsequent head of the St Petersburg FSB, before becoming first deputy director of the FSB under Putin and Patrushev and subsequently Putin’s presidential plenipotentiary to the North-West Federal District, who was evicted in 2010. Another is Alexei Kudrin, who resigned from his formal position as Finance Minister because of his publicly stated opposition to the leadership’s spending plans, particularly on defence, though he continues to occupy influential positions, including on the Presidential Economic Council.

If Putin (and Medvedev) find it difficult to fire people, they have nevertheless made it clear that there are certain rules that must be observed: in November 2013, Putin stated ‘I will have to remind [my colleagues] that there are fixed practices for resolving questions before going out into the media’. ‘It is well known’, he continued, ‘that if someone does not agree with something, as Mr Kudrin did’, then they can go over into the expert community and work with the leadership from there. Kudrin had voiced his opposition to defence expenditure publicly in the USA, and at the time, Medvedev suggested that if he disagreed with the course of the president, there was only one course of action – resignation. Similarly, Cherkesov’s departure is often attributed to his public statements about internal divisions in the leadership team.

Other senior figures to have been fired or resigned include Anatoliy Serdyukov, who was fired by Putin having been implicated in a multi-faceted scandal including a major corruption case in the MoD, and Vladislav Surkov, another long-term senior figure, who was first moved from the position of first deputy head of the presidential administration during the ‘rotation’ in December 2011 to the position of deputy prime minister – from which he resigned in May 2012. Putin’s press spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed that Surkov tendered his resignation after a meeting with Putin at which Putin had criticised the government for the implementation of his May Decrees. Reportage of the meeting suggested a disagreement in the feasibility of implementation of the instructions: while Surkov had suggested that the government had made progress, Putin sought 100 per cent fulfillment – a ‘mobilisation’ speed that was not possible to maintain. As in the case of Kudrin’s move, there was much speculation about Surkov’s departure. The ‘resignations’ of both Kudrin and Surkov appear to have been the result of a complex of reasons. Kudrin, some suggested, was not prepared to serve under Prime
Minister Dmitri Medvedev, and Surkov faced an investigation by the Investigative Committee for embezzlement. Vladimir Markin, the Investigative Committee’s spokesman, also questioned whether Surkov should keep his position in the cabinet having made critical comments about Russia during a speech in London. Peskov explicitly denied that the public dispute between Surkov and Markin or the embezzlement investigation lay behind Surkov’s resignation. Also like Kudrin, Surkov’s ‘resignation’ was ‘limited’ – in effect what might be termed a rotation down, in which he has retained considerable influence, rather than ‘firing’ and complete departure from policy. Surkov did not go far from power, and he was subsequently appointed as an aide to the president in 2013 and to lead the department of Commonwealth of Independent States, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the presidential administration, and appears to have played an active role in Russia’s Ukraine policy since 2014. This again illustrates the point that when senior figures are removed from ministerial or senior political positions, they often retain prominent positions within the system. Boris Gryzlov and Rashid Nurgaliev, for instance, when relieved of their duties as Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament (2011) and Minister of the Interior (2012), both retained positions as permanent members of the Security Council. Indeed Nurgaliev, whose Ministry endured numerous scandals under his leadership (2003–2012), was appointed deputy secretary of the Security Council.²⁷

It also reflects the effects of the somewhat faster rotations and dismissals at lower levels, and it is noteworthy that during Putin’s third presidential term not only have regional governors continued to be removed from office by the leadership,²⁸ but so have ministers. Indeed, the turnover of ministers since 2012 has been notably higher: Viktor Ishaev, a long-serving governor of Khabarovsk region, then presidential plenipotentiary to the Far East for three years before being appointed the first Minister of the Far East when the ministry was created in 2012, was fired having endured at least two previous rounds of public criticism by Putin for ineffectiveness. Others to have lost their positions, apparently because of Putin’s unhappiness with their performance, include Oleg Govorun, a prominent member of UR who had served in the presidential administration before briefly being appointed first presidential plenipotentiary to the Central Federal District in September 2011 and then in May 2012 Minister for Regional Development. He was relieved of his ministerial duties in October that year (but has subsequently returned to lead a department in the presidential administration).
The evolution of the team has also involved bringing people in as individuals have proved themselves and been promoted to senior positions – though observers suggest that earning Putin’s trust is a difficult and long-term process. As Anatoliy Rakhlin, Putin’s judo trainer put it, Putin works with a close group not ‘because of their pretty eyes, but because he trusts people who are tried and true’. One of the most prominent is Vyacheslav Volodin. Volodin, of whom more below, has extensive political experience, and was deputy prime minister and chief of staff to Putin’s cabinet in 2010. In 2011, he was involved in the establishment of the ONF and in December that year he was appointed first deputy head of the presidential administration, responsible for the ‘reset’ of Russian politics.

This form of broadly stable but evolving collective leadership in Russia is often described as ‘krugovaya poruka’. There are various translations for this feature of Russian political life, but in effect, it means ‘circle of shared responsibility’, and indicates the ties that bind groups together. Such a collective arrangement thrives, as one analyst has suggested, in an environment in which administrative and legal institutions are ‘insufficiently developed to oversee the enforcement of legal rights and responsibilities’. It is, in effect, a mechanism to ensure that things are done. It offers a form of circular control that both ensures conformity and solidarity, submerging individual interests into a collective unit and binding individuals together into a network: all members of a group are held jointly responsible for the actions of individuals, and it thus acts as a means of burden sharing, mutual obligation and protection. It also underpins conservative network evolution, both in terms of collegial rule and decision-making and recruitment to the group. Appointments to positions are carried out cautiously, a longer-term process of testing an individual’s loyalty, work ethic, reliability and ability to fulfil tasks.

**Building a vertical of power?**

Against this background of the evolution of a collective leadership team with Putin at its heart, the vertical of power is a central feature of the Russian political landscape. As with the factions and the balance between formal instructions and informal rules, the vertical of power existed before Putin’s rise, and its origins can be traced to the early post-Cold War era. In the mainstream Western discussion about Russia, however, it is usually associated with Vladimir Putin’s attempt to establish a vertical chain of hierarchical authority,
establishing strong government with leadership from the top, and instilling unconditional discipline and responsibility to fulfil tasks. One Russian observer suggested that the need for this was almost immediately illustrated when Putin first came to power in 2000, with the sinking of the Kursk submarine. The way the military authorities ‘systematically misled’ him convinced Putin, according to Alexander Goltz, that the structure of authority needed to be overhauled, leading to a restructuring of power including the replacement in 2004 of direct elections for regional governors with presidential appointments.\(^{32}\) This remained a work in progress, however, and during his presidency, Medvedev also worked to complete the vertical of power, often appointing technocratic managers to attempt to improve the state’s effectiveness.

As noted above, most attention has focused on the appointments of ex-KGB and security services personnel to positions across the bureaucracy and big business and the undemocratic ramifications. Most observers suggest that Putin’s attempt to build an ever more vertical of power has been, if flawed, largely successful. At the same time, whether the vertical of power works has received less detailed attention. In fact, official Russian sources have long conceded that the vertical does not work, and presidential instructions often remain unfulfilled or are only tardily or partially fulfilled, and responses to crises slow and ineffective. The leadership is reduced to micro-management (known as ‘manual control’), whether in terms of routine administrative tasks and the implementation of policy, or in responding to specific problems. This is caused by a number of problems, including corruption, blurred lines of responsibility between ministries and agencies, limitations in bureaucratic capacity and a degree of passive resistance in the bureaucracy.\(^{33}\)

Since late 2011, Putin has instigated an ongoing rotation of senior figures to enhance the alignment of power and administrative effectiveness. Changes include an economic rotation in June 2013, the creation of new ministries and rotations of presidential plenipotentiaries in August and September 2013 and May 2014 (the latter presented by the authorities as an attempt to align minister, presidential plenipotentiary and regional governor in strategically important areas). Similarly, as noted above, ministers and governors are monitored by the presidential administration and the ONF for their effectiveness.

Another way of looking at the vertical of power, therefore, is this search for effectiveness. How might the political landscape outlined above be drawn upon the better to understand the vertical
of power, attempts to improve it, and the ‘reset’? The cascade of networks can be framed in three groups – the ‘leadership team’, the ‘federal locomotives’, who are dispatched to oversee the most important tasks, and ‘managers’.

The leadership team

In interviews with Putin in 2000, he was asked whose proposals he listened to, who he trusted and who was on his team. The answers were illuminating: Putin named Sergei Ivanov, Nikolai Patrushev and Dmitri Medvedev as those with whom he had ‘brotherly closeness’, and that he ‘trusted’ Alexei Kudrin. This is illuminating, not just because of their backgrounds and long-shared experiences working for Anatoliy Sobchak in St Petersburg or the KGB, but because of the subsequent trajectories of these individuals, who have worked closely with Putin throughout his rise to power and then occupied senior positions since. Nikolai Patrushev, for instance, was appointed to senior positions in the presidential administration in 1998, and then as Putin’s deputy in the FSB in 1999, before replacing him as Director in 1999, where he remained until Putin appointed him Secretary of the Security Council in 2008. Similarly, Sergei Ivanov served as Putin’s deputy in the presidential administration in 1998–1999, before Putin appointed him Minister of Defence in 2001. Subsequently, he occupied positions as deputy and first deputy prime minister, before being appointed head of the presidential administration in December 2011.

Dmitri Medvedev worked with Putin in St Petersburg, and his career, too, has largely echoed Putin’s. In December 1999, Putin appointed him head of the presidential administration and he ran Putin’s presidential election campaign in 2000. Since then, he has occupied positions in Gazprom as chairman of the board of directors (during which he oversaw pricing negotiations with Belarus and Ukraine), the presidential administration, the government as first deputy prime minister in 2005 (responsible for national priority projects, including public health, housing and education) before becoming president in 2008. In his election campaign in 2007, Medvedev often stated his readiness to continue the course set by Putin. While this is not a complete list of the inner circle, today, these ‘brotherly’ figures represent the core of Putin’s command team, occupying the heights of formal (and informal) Russian politics: Patrushev is Secretary of the Security Council, Ivanov is head of the presidential administration and Medvedev is prime minister.
‘Federal locomotives’

Closely associated with this core leadership team is a somewhat larger group of those who are trusted to carry out the strategic agenda. As two prominent observers have pointed out, the ‘existence of such figures is the difference between a bureaucracy that does not and cannot get things done and a group of individuals who can get things done and profit in doing so’.35 This small group, some, but not all of whom, are from St Petersburg, includes individuals from politics, the government apparatus and big business, and is directly and personally accountable to Vladimir Putin. They are tasked with leading the fulfilment of strategically important projects, and trusted to deliver results – and are rewarded (and protected) by Putin on the basis of their performance. In one interview, Arkady Rotenberg stated that such individuals had to perform well in big, difficult projects, completing them within tight deadlines – there are very few people in Russia who can achieve this and they are ‘not entitled to make a mistake’, nor would Putin protect them if they were to abuse the responsibility they had been given.36 In this group are those, as noted in Chapter 3, who led the effort to reinvigorate UR in 2011, and those such as German Gref, minister of economics and trade from 2000 to 2007 and now president of Sberbank, and Dmitri Kozak, who worked with Putin in St Petersburg City Council, before leading Putin’s election campaign in 2004 and becoming presidential plenipotentiary to the Southern Federal District until 2007 and then becoming deputy prime minister in 2008. Since then Kozak, with Arkadiy Rotenberg and others from big business, was tasked with organising the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014. Another is Yuri Trutnev: Trutnev was elected mayor of Perm in 1996. He was elected governor of Perm region 2000–2004, when he was appointed minister for natural resources and the environment, before becoming an advisor to Putin from 2012–2013. In 2013, he was appointed deputy prime minister and presidential plenipotentiary to the Far Eastern federal district.

Perhaps the most important ‘federal locomotive’ since Putin came to power, however, is Igor Sechin, who first worked for Putin in St Petersburg. Like those in the core leadership team,37 his career has been closely tied to Putin’s. Numerous Russian observers have suggested that Sechin quickly became Putin’s trusted assistant, an ‘inseparable colleague’, even the only colleague that Putin took with him on all assignments. They emphasise Sechin’s loyalty to Putin, and note that even from the early 1990s Sechin ran Putin’s
apparatus, coordinating departments before moving with Putin to Moscow and being appointed to different positions in the presidential administration.\textsuperscript{38}

Indeed, subsequently, Sechin appears to have accompanied Putin every step of the way, running his timetable, and being put in charge of dealing with business conflicts. In 2004, Sechin became chairman of the board of directors of Rosneft, becoming, as another Russian observer put it, ‘Putin’s right hand in the energy sector’.\textsuperscript{39} In 2008, he left the presidential administration, being appointed deputy prime minister for industry, energy and environment, leading numerous government commissions with authority well beyond the hydrocarbon sector, becoming chairman of the board of directors of the United Shipbuilding Company and Inter-RAO UES, and playing an important role in Russian foreign policy in China, Latin America and Eurasia. In 2011, Sechin was included on the list of candidates as a deputy for United Russia in the parliamentary elections, and early 2012, he became president of Rosneft and executive secretary of Putin’s energy commission. Speaking in March 2012, Putin stated that he valued Sechin’s ‘professionalism and tenacity’ – ‘he can see things through to the end: if he takes something on, then you can be certain that the business will be done.’\textsuperscript{40}

Managers

A third category, the largest and most diverse, consists of proven managers. The need for better management is one of the primary concerns of the Russian leadership, a point regularly made by Putin himself who critiques or praises individuals for their success or failure in this. These are individuals (and their networks) who have a proven track record in resolving problems, including well established figures such as Sergey Sobyanin, mayor of Moscow, Sergey Kirienko, head of Rosatom, and Anatoliy Chubais, head of Rusnano. Alexander Khloponin also fits into this category, having extensive experience in business and administration. Formerly chairman of Norilsk Nikel, Khloponin, a member of United Russia, has served as governor of Taymyr Autonomous Okrug and then Krasnoyarsk Krai, where he reversed economic decline. In 2010, he was appointed deputy prime minister and presidential plenipotentiary to the North Caucasus Federal District.\textsuperscript{41}

Others who might fall into this category include those in the main bodies of the presidential administration, security council and government – those with long experience in these organisations, such
as Larisa Brychova, longtime head of the presidential state-legal directorate in the presidential administration, and Alexei Gromov, who has served in the presidential administration since 1996, and since May 2012 as first deputy chief of staff. This also includes those such as Yuri Averyanov and Evgeniy Lukyanov, long-serving members of the Security Council apparatus, and now respectively first deputy and deputy of the Security Council.

Konstantin Chuichenko is another. A fellow student of Dmitri Medvedev’s, he was appointed chief of Gazprom’s legal department in 2001, rising to become the chairman of the board of directors of Gazprom media holding in 2003, and, in July 2004, executive director of RosUkrEnergo representing Gazprombank. In 2008, he was appointed head of the main control directorate of the presidential administration. Similarly, Anton Vaino began his career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, before joining the presidential protocol department in 2002. In October 2007, he was appointed the government’s deputy chief of staff, becoming head of the prime minister’s protocol. He was briefly chief of government staff before being appointed to the position of deputy head of the presidential administration in May 2012.

Towards the future: refreshing the system?

If networks, and testing for loyalty and effectiveness are at the heart of the evolution of the system as new managers are promoted, how has this been evident in the tightening of the vertical of power and the ongoing political ‘reset’? The first point to note is the increasing prominence of organisations such as the ONF and ASI in both the tightening of the vertical and the reset, and political youth organisations in the latter. The second is that these organisations appear to be playing the role envisaged for them: a springboard for the emergence of a new generation who reached state-level politics since 2007.

This newer generation includes those recently appointed to ministerial positions – Alexander Galushka, for instance, was appointed Minister for the Development of the Far East in September 2013. Born in 1975, he has risen quickly and holds a number of senior managerial positions across the presidential and governmental apparatus, including on the central committee of the ONF, the advisory council of the ASI, and the President’s Economic Council. Others include Andrey Nikitin, born in 1979, who is chief executive officer of the ASI, and Alexander Brechalov – who holds a range of positions including
as a member of the supervisory board of the ASI, the co-chair of the ONF’s central committee, and president of the Russian organisation of small and medium enterprises (OPORA). Another is Andrey Bocharov, formerly a member of UR, who took up a position as head of the executive committee of the ONF, before Putin appointed him acting governor of Volgograd in summer 2014. Others who appear to be earning reputations as effective managers include the governor of Leningrad region, Alexander Drozdenko, and Dmitri Kobylkin, governor of Yamalo-Nenetski autonomous region and member of United Russia’s higher council. As one well-placed Russian suggested, such individuals, along with important deputy ministers, are mainly of a similar (comparatively youthful) age, and there is a ‘feeling of teamwork being developed’ among them.

The ‘reset’ also illustrates how the leadership team is evolving. Since 2011, Vyacheslav Volodin has led the political reset, including the development of the ONF. Volodin himself has long experience in regional politics, starting in the Saratov regional legislature, before being elected to the State Duma in 1999 as a member of the Fatherland-All Russia party faction – of which he became head in September 2001. In 2003, he was elected to the Duma again as a member of United Russia, and the following year became deputy duma speaker and first deputy head of UR. In 2007, he was elected deputy chairman of UR, before being appointed deputy prime minister and chief of staff of the government’s executive office.

Others who are emerging in the context of the reset include Alexei Anisimov, who was involved in the establishment of the ONF, overseeing the formation of the organisation’s regional offices, and acting as deputy chief of staff in Putin’s presidential election campaign. In 2012, he was appointed head of regional policy in the domestic policy department of the presidential administration before becoming head of the ONF’s executive committee in May 2014. Tatiana Voronova, born in 1975, has made huge career steps since she was leader of the Irkutsk branch of ‘Molodyozhnoe Edinstvo’ in 2000. She was elected to the State Duma in 2007 and appears to have worked with Anisimov for Putin in 2008. She was appointed to the presidential administration in 2012 to lead a new department on relations with non-systemic opposition (led by Anisimov), and was subsequently moved to oversee regional politics before replacing Oleg Morozov as head of the domestic politics in March 2015. Voronova’s rise illustrates again the emergence of a younger generation to influential positions. Maxim Rudnev, born in 1987, was appointed director of the central executive committee of United...
Russia in September 2014. Timur Prokopenko, who had served as press secretary first to deputy speaker of the Duma Vladimir Pekhtin and then as press secretary to Boris Gryzlo (2009–2011), was appointed to the domestic politics department of the presidential administration in October 2012, overseeing the information policy division, then, from December deputy head of the department and responsible for youth and information policy. Like Voronova, Rudnev and Prokopenko have emerged from systemic party youth organisations – in their cases, UR’s ‘Molodaya Gvardia’ (MG), in which they played prominent roles since its formation in 2005.46

Russia beyond Putin?

Much is made in the Western discussion of Russia about the centrality of Vladimir Putin, his popularity ratings, and his use of patriotic, even nationalist rhetoric to boost this popularity. Similarly, much is made of the non-transparency of Russian decision-making and the relationships between clans and networks. Both of these points have some merit. Undoubtedly, Vladimir Putin is popular: since March 2014, polls conducted by the Levada Centre have suggested that support for him has exceeded 75 per cent. All other political figures, including Zyuganov, receive support of less than 10 per cent.47 Putin is also undoubtedly a central figure in Russian politics, often personally taking decisions on matters of strategic import (such as those taken regarding the situation in Ukraine in 2014) at the summit of the vertical of power and at the heart of a system that he has adapted and tailored – and much of that system is non-transparent.

With this in mind, it is important to look beyond Putin to attempt to interpret Russia and how it is changing, including how teams take shape and individuals are promoted. The team surrounding Putin is made up of groups of individuals with whom he has worked for many years, a largely stable one comprised of trusted associates, professionals, and a regional elite. This leadership team has taken shape over a considerable time frame, and stretches deep and wide into Russian business, administration and politics. If the core leadership team consists of trusted and proven long-term associates of Putin, a poll conducted in February 2015 suggests that a majority sees that Putin’s wider team consists of those of a ‘like mind’ (‘edinomyshlenniki’ – in other words who share Putin’s views) and professionals. Sixty-one per cent thought that there should be more of those who share Putin’s views in the team, and a decreasing number
of people think there should be a radical change in the team – from 47 in 2012, to 21 per cent in 2015. A majority (54 per cent) thought that the team should remain broadly as it is.48

Beyond the core leadership team, however, the professionals and regional elites who play important roles both implementing the decisions of the top leadership team, and even being involved in decision-making on non-strategic matters, should be an increasing focus of attention as individuals are brought into the wider team, tested and promoted. Those who succeed are likely to have considerable experience across business, state administration and regional politics, and will have developed networks accordingly. To understand better the ongoing rotation, and unavoidable retirements and replacements, and the elections in 2016, 2018 and 2024, observers will benefit from having much greater familiarity with the inner workings of Russian politics, having watched promotions and being aware of who is considered loyal and effective (and who are in their networks); and an awareness of those who have risen in administrative positions. Similarly, organisations such as the ONF, the ASI and youth party organisations appear to be serving as platforms for both the co-option of individuals into the system, and the emergence of new figures, including a younger generation who are playing an increasing role in running Russia.

Indeed, this is becoming increasingly necessary, since retirements, illness and deaths begin to oblige the leadership team to evolve as it seeks effective managers: Vladimir Yakunin, long-term head of Russian Railways and a member of the leadership team, in effect took retirement in August 2015 (though in October it was reported in Russian media that he was dismissed); and in January 2016, General Igor Sergun, head of Russian military intelligence, passed away aged 58. Other prominent individuals are close to retirement age – Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev is 64, for instance, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is 65. This adds emphasis to the Russian observer’s point above about teamwork taking shape among a new generation of upwardly mobile individuals and networks.

Notes

2 This has been a regular feature of the mainstream Western discussion of Russia for some years. See discussion in Chapter 3, and B. Judah, ‘The end of Vladimir Putin’, Politico Magazine (31 July 2014); B. Whitmore, ‘The warlord checkmates the Tsar?’, The Power Vertical, RFE/RL (18 March 2015); A. Motyl, ‘Goodbye, Putin: why the President’s days are numbered’, Foreign Affairs (5 February 2015).

3 L. Shevtsova, ‘Has the Russian system’s agony begun?’, The American Interest (17 March 2015).


5 Volodin’s phrase was part of an answer to a question about Western sanctions on Russia. Though the aphorism has been widely reported, the transcript of the session is unavailable to offer a more precise quote or to check the context and other points he made during the session. “‘No Putin, no Russia” says Kremlin deputy chief of staff’, Moscow Times (23 October 2014), www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/no-putin-no-russia-says-kremlin-deputy-chief-of-staff/509981.html. See also ‘Est Putin – est Rossia, Nyet Putina – Nyet Rossii’ [There is Putin – there is Russia, no Putin – no Russia], Izvestiya (22 October 2014).


7 See, for instance, ‘Russian hearts, minds and refrigerators’, Financial Times (16 February 2015). This is the ‘battle for Russian minds’ between the agenda on Russian state television of a glorious Russia in a patriotic struggle against Ukraine and the West and the imposition of sanctions having a negative impact on living standards, leading to the increasingly sparse and expensive contents of the fridge at home – thus undermining Russian support for Putin’s policies in Ukraine.


9 Correspondence with Jacob Kipp, May 2015.


12 Though the two teams of officials had considerable crossover in membership, Kryshtanovskaya and White suggested that only Dmitri Medvedev and Sergei Ivanov were common to all three groups. O. Kryshtanovskaya and S. White, ‘Inside the Putin court: a research note’, Europe-Asia Studies, 57:7 (November 2005), p. 1069.

13 Kryshtanovskaya and White, ‘Inside the Putin court’.


17 Here is not the place to list everyone. Minchenko’s ‘Candidate members’ list, as framed in ‘Politburo 2.0’ i postkrymskaya Rossia’ [Politburo 2.0 and post-Crimea Russia] gives a good list that is largely compatible with the other models.


20 Ledeneva, Can Russia Modernise?, p. 77.

21 O. Ptashkin, ‘Zakon o bespredele’ [Law on lawlessness], gazeta.ru (18 June 2010).

22 V. Putin, ‘Pochemu trudno uvolit cheloveka’ [Why it is hard to fire a person], Russkiy Pioner (16 June 2009), http://ruspioner.ru/cool/m/ single/1999. There was some suggestion that Putin himself did not write the article. Nevertheless, his name is attached to it, and thus commentators agreed that it would have been edited and censored by Putin and his assistants. Others, including Medvedev, have voiced similar views.
23 He is now a KPRF deputy in the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament.
26 ‘Soveshchanie o khode ispolnenia ukazov prezidenta ot 7 Maya 2012 goda’ [Meeting about the implementation of presidential decrees of 7 May 2012] (7 May 2013), www.kremlin.ru/news/18039; ‘Surkov uvolen s dolzhnosti vitze-prem’era’ [Surkov fired as deputy prime minister], lenta.ru (8 May 2013), http://lenta.ru/news/2013/05/08/surkov/; ‘Ot redaktssii: pravitel’stvo otvechaet pered prezidentom, a president ne otvechaet ni pered kem’ [Editorial: the government is responsible to the president, while the president is responsible to nobody], Vedomosti (8 May 2013).
27 He was replaced as Minister of the Interior by Vladimir Kolokoltsev, a career policeman and Moscow Police Commissioner from 2009 to 2012.
28 Medvedev fired numerous governors during his term in office, and some senior figures such as Yuri Luzhkov, long-term mayor of Moscow, in September 2010. Though he had been co-opted into United Russia, he was not a member of the inner circle. T. Stanovaya, ‘Ot bitvy Moskvi k bitve za Moskvu’ [From the battle of Moscow to the battle for Moscow], politcom.ru (16 September 2010); T. Stanovaya, ‘Moskovskaya sdelka tandema’ [Tandem’s Moscow deal], politcom.ru (4 October 2010). Several governors have been fired since 2012, including Sergei Bozhenov, governor of Volgograd, and Alexander Khoroshavin, Sakhalin governor. It is worth noting that the ONF appears to have played an important role in the monitoring of these governors and requesting their removal. Governors have not, by contrast, been voted out by the populations in the yearly regional elections.
31 L. Ryazanova-Clarke, ‘How upright is the vertical? Ideological norm negotiation in Russian media discourse’, in I. Lunde and M. Paulsen (eds),
Beyond Putin?

From Poets to Podonki: Linguistic Authority and Norm Negotiation in Modern Russian Culture (University of Bergen: Department of Foreign Languages, 2009).

32 A. Goltz, ‘Putin’s power vertical stretches back to Kursk’, *Moscow Times* (17 August 2010).


37 Sechin is mentioned alongside Patrushev, Ivanov, Medvedev and Kudrin.


40 Putin, speaking on 7 March 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYo3YyyI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYo3YyyI).

41 In May 2014, Khloponin was reappointed deputy prime minister, but relieved of his duties as presidential plenipotentiary to the North Caucasus.

42 As noted in Chapter 3, Putin first proposed establishing the ASI in May 2011 at a regional meeting of the ASI, an organisation that would promote new business and act as a ‘spring board’ for young people – and co-opting them.

43 ‘Gubernator na kontakte’ [Controlling governor], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (30 March 2015), www.rg.ru/2015/03/30/gubernatory.html.


45 In conversation with the author, January 2016.

46 Rudnev was a member of MG’s coordination council and was responsible for mobilisation in 2010–2012, and Prokopenko led the group from 2010–2012.

47 Gennadiy Zyuganov received 7 per cent, Alexei Navalniy 1 per cent. ‘Reiting Putina upersya v protestniy elektorat’ [Putin’s rating has run into the protesting electorate], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (1 April 2015), www.ng.ru/politics/2015-04-01/1_rating.html.

be less independent than some polling organisations such as Levada, but nonetheless, the results offer an interesting view into how the leadership team is evolving. ‘Badovski: edinomyshlenniki vazhnee professionalov-naemnikov’ [Badovski: like minds are more important than professional-journeymen], Vzglyad (23 March 2015), http://vz.ru/news/2015/3/23/735875.html.