Wheels within wheels

**How Mr Putin keeps the country under control**

Oct 22nd 2016 | [From the print edition](http://www.economist.com/printedition/2016-10-22)



MYSTERY, MIRACLE AND authority are three powers alone able to hold the conscience of people captive, explains Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in “The Brothers Karamazov”. Mr Putin has mastered all three. Yet none of these is as important as secrecy, the main tool of a good spy. Nobody really knows what goes on behind the Kremlin’s thick walls, or inside Mr Putin’s head. But several things are becoming clearer. Mr Putin’s rule is turning increasingly personal; a generational shift is taking place within his entourage; and the FSB, the successor organisation to the KGB, is emerging as the main mechanism for exercising power, often at the expense of all other security services, including the police.

Mr Putin had always relied heavily on his former KGB colleagues, but after the annexation of Crimea the expansion of the FSB gained new momentum and greater public legitimacy. It now openly wields political and economic power. Mr Putin has recently appointed three members of his security detail and one former KGB officer as regional governors.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, the KGB was a “combat division” of the Communist Party, tightly controlled by its central committee, which did not want to see a repeat of Stalin’s purges. When the party collapsed in 1991 the KGB lost its lustre, but the new rulers never dismantled it. Though the party could not survive without ideology, the KGB could.

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Today the FSB is personally overseen by Mr Putin. “There is no political control over the FSB. It is a self-contained and closed system,” says Andrei Soldatov, an expert on Russia’s security services. Behind the scenes, the FSB controls the Investigative Committee, the Russian equivalent of America’s FBI. The prosecutor’s office, in effect, has no independent oversight of the FSB and the courts take their cue from it.

On September 18th, the day of the parliamentary elections, *Kommersant*, an authoritative daily newspaper, reported the Kremlin’s plan to fold other parts of the former KGB, including the foreign intelligence services (SVR) and the Federal Protection Service, which is responsible for guarding top Russian officials, into a new megastructure: the Ministry for State Security, or MGB, which is what the KGB was called under Stalin. The date of the report is telling. The parliament has become an appendix of the FSB. As Tatyana Stanovaya of the Carnegie Moscow Centre notes, the FSB drafts most of the repressive laws that are rubber-stamped by the parliament.

The FSB is emerging as the main mechanism for exercising power in Russia

The FSB is a notoriously opaque organisation, but one of its most powerful figures appears to be Sergei Korolev, who used to head the internal-security department that can investigate the staff of all security services, including its own. He has recently been promoted to the job of overseeing all financial and business activity in Russia. His team was behind most of the high-profile arrests of governors, mayors and policemen in recent years. These started with two young generals from the interior ministry, Denis Sugrobov, the head of the ministry’s economic-crime and anti-corruption department, and his deputy, Boris Kolesnikov. Both in their mid-30s, they had been installed in their jobs by Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s current prime minister and former president, and given carte blanche to go after corrupt senior officials.

Yet soon afterwards they became victims of a sting operation set up by the FSB. In his prison cell Mr Kolesnikov suffered a head injury and six weeks later, during a formal interrogation, he apparently killed himself by jumping out of a sixth-floor window. Mr Sugrobov remains in jail.

The public is regularly treated to footage of governors, policemen and officials being led away in handcuffs, their homes being searched and enormous piles of cash being confiscated. The most spectacular arrest so far has been that of Dmitry Zakharchenko, a police colonel who had hidden $120m in cash in his sister’s flat. A few weeks earlier the FSB had raided a vast mansion belonging to Andrei Belyaninov, the head of the customs service and a former KGB officer, and found $670,000 in cash, a one-kilo gold ingot and assorted old-master paintings. Mr Belyaninov was fired from his job but not charged.

Hardly anyone believes that such raids help the fight against corruption, which remains an organising principle of Russia’s political system, but they go down well with the public. It is said that Mr Putin is using men like Mr Korolev to purge the ranks of the FSB itself and keep its members on their toes and the elites in check. The practice harks back to Stalin, who wielded his power almost exclusively through the NKVD, the KGB’s predecessor, regularly purging the party.

Mr Putin’s rotation of cadres so far has been much softer. None of the senior people in his entourage has yet lost his freedom or his fortune. Mr Belyaninov has said he is hoping to find another government post. Mr Korolev’s rival has been “exiled” to Rosneft, the mammoth oil company. Every important Russian firm and institution has an FSB officer seconded to it, a practice preserved from Soviet days.

But as Mr Putin’s personality cult grows, he is severing his connections with the old comrades who remember him as a lowly young KGB officer and bringing in new people who have known him only as president. Many of those who had started with him have already stepped down, including Sergei Ivanov, a long-serving chief of staff and former KGB general, Viktor Ivanov, the former head of an anti-drugs agency, and Evgeny Murov, the trusted (but ageing) head of the Federal Protection Service. Mr Putin has also got rid of some of the old KGB guard who had headed Russia’s largest state-owned corporations.

**Pass it on**

They have been replaced by youngish men who owe their careers entirely to Mr Putin. Mr Putin’s new chief of staff, Anton Vaino, aged 44, is the grandson of a Soviet-era Estonian Communist Party leader and a third-generation bureaucrat. But while civilians have been installed to run the Kremlin apparatus, the children of the old *siloviki* are moving into key positions in state banks and natural-resource companies. The son of Mr Murov is chairman of the management board of the state-owned Federal Grid Company, Russia’s main electricity supplier. Dmitry Patrushev, the son of the Security Council chief, Nikolai Patrushev, heads the Russian Agricultural Bank, a large state-owned bank.

One of the communist regime’s key weaknesses was the impossibility of passing on wealth. When old party bosses died, their families were mostly left with nothing. It was also one of the main reasons why many members of the Soviet *nomenklatura* supported the revolution in 1991. These days Russia’s elite can pass on its possessions to its children, but its wealth and its physical safety depend on Mr Putin.

Perhaps in an effort at diversification, Mr Putin recently announced the creation of a new security structure, the National Guard. Headed by Viktor Zolotov, who used to be one of Mr Putin’s bodyguards, it has 25,000-40,000 special commandos at its disposal, along with 400,000 troops. These are not part of the regular army of about 930,000 and report directly to Mr Putin.

The creation of the National Guard is meant to head off the threat of another colour revolution (as the series of peaceful uprisings in former Soviet republics became known), explains Alexander Golts, a Russian military analyst. The scenarios used in its training are based on the protests in Ukraine and involve the use of tear gas and water cannon as well as conventional weapons. One of the lessons the Kremlin learned from the failed coup of August 1991 was that in a political crisis a regular army may be reluctant to use force against protesters.

As a former bodyguard, Mr Zolotov is responsible for Mr Putin’s personal safety, but also for providing some balance to the powers of the FSB. In a closed political system, trust is low.