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Are Russia's Security Agencies At War (With Each Other)?

After a period of relative calm, Russia's fractious security agencies are once again at odds with each other. Against the backdrop of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Mark Galeotti assesses the prospects of a new intra-elite turf war breaking out in Moscow.

By Mark Galeotti for ISN

While there is often a temptation to lump all of Russia's so-called 'siloviki'—the 'men of force'—into one faction, they are, in fact, divided by myriad fracture lines: factional, personal, political and pragmatic. The last time conflicts between these agencies became a serious problem was in 2007, when a corruption scandal led to a [major dispute between agencies](#) that, in turn, led to arrests and even rumored deaths, before President Vladimir Putin had to step in and impose an armistice. Back then, Putin was at the height of his power. Now, as new tensions mount and the need to cooperate over the Sochi security operation recedes, rivalries amongst the siloviki are becoming increasingly open, something that may not only weaken Putin but also perhaps reflect a growing suspicion that he is no longer as powerful and his time may be beginning to come to an end.

Most-Favored Oprichnik

Of course, the security chiefs and agencies remain a long way off realistically challenging the Russian president. Indeed, the struggles are often around opportunities to seem most useful to him - through the tsar's favor come budgets, privileges and precedence. This has certainly been the lesson of the rise of Alexander Bastrykin, the head of the Investigative Committee (SKR), [an agency](#) that carries out primary investigations of serious crimes before referring them to the Prosecutor General's Office (GPRF).

Bastrykin is unusual amongst senior Russian officials in having [no meaningful support base](#) of clients below him, nor allies and patrons beside and above him. He [survives through his utility to Putin](#), and so his actions are often a good indicator of the president's actual or assumed intent. In 2013, Bastrykin was very much in prominence, culminating in the trial of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in July. However, with the decision to free Navalny on bail and allow him to contest the Moscow mayoral elections—very much at the urging of powerful incumbent Sergei Sobyanin, who wanted a contested vote to legitimize himself—Bastrykin had clearly suffered a [serious political setback](#). In the latter months of the year, he kept a strikingly low profile.

This year, though, he is back at the forefront, championing a new role for the Kremlin as the scourge

of dishonest oligarchs, tax evaders and corrupt officials. In a series of interviews, he has expressed [cautious distaste for the privatization](#) campaigns of the past and warned that economic crime ought to be considered a [serious national security threat](#). In this, he is undoubtedly his master's voice, as Putin appears to be looking likewise to re-legitimize himself with the public as the tsar who can keep the corrupt and self-serving boyar aristocrats of Russia in check.

The Economic Crime Honeypot

However, Bastrykin is also using this as an opportunity to advance his and the SKR's agenda. While talking about the ills of tax crimes, he also proposes that the SKR ought to have a greater role in investigating similar white-collar offences. This would give him greater political leverage, as economic crimes are increasingly the weapon of choice in intra-elite struggles. It is also popular with the less-honorable officers of the SKR, as these crimes also lend themselves well to lucrative and easy bribe-taking.

This desire to maximize the opportunities for political firepower and illegal enrichment are at the heart of an increasingly bitter struggle between the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) over the latter's clumsily-named Main Directorate of Economic Security and Anti-Corruption (with the equally clumsy acronym GUEBiPK). There have long been rumors about the directorate and tensions between its head, Lt. General Denis Sugrobov, and Deputy Interior Minister Yuri Alexeev, head of the MVD's Investigations Department (SD). Sugrobov, who at 34 had last year become the youngest general in the history of the post-Soviet MVD, was associated with Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, a patron of diminishing influence. He was also reportedly frustrated that Alexeev did not move more quickly or forcefully with cases he raised, just as Alexeev considered Sugrobov too interested in quick headlines and high-profile scalps.

However, these internal disputes acquired a more serious edge as the SKR began looking for ways to assert its dominance over the SD, as its counterpart within the MVD, and the FSB—which has long had its own economic security division—sought to cherry-pick from the GUEBiPK's cases and investigators. Late February saw a sudden blood-letting, as both Alexeev and Sugrobov was sacked by presidential decree. This followed the SKR's decision to open a criminal case against senior GUEBiPK officers, who stand accused of trying to [entrap an FSB officer](#) on bribery charges. The SKR then [arrested Major General Boris Kolesnikov](#), Sugrobov's right hand man, generally regarded as a tough and effective investigator. It was his team that reportedly opened the investigation into embezzlement through the defense ministry's [Oboronservis](#) property arm that led to the downfall of minister Anatoly Serdyukov.

A War Of All Against All

While the SKR and FSB seem to be cooperating against the MVD, they are nevertheless competitors on other fronts. For example, talk of the creation of some investigatory super-agency—a "Russian FBI"—have resurfaced periodically. Putin, a KGB veteran who well understands the power of dividing and thus ruling the security apparatus, has always held back from such a move. Nonetheless, the Russian press has now begun [reporting leaks](#) to the effect that such an agency may be announced this spring, to be fully operational by 2016 or 2017. It would be founded on the basis of—and thus dominated by—Bastrykin's SKR, assimilating relevant elements from the FSB, MVD and Federal Antinarcotics Service (FSKN).

Unsurprisingly, the FSB is opposed to this move, unless it can instead ensure that this new agency is under its own control. The MVD is likewise hostile (and the suspicion is that Alexeev's ouster was in part to make the ministry look like it could not manage its own investigations department). Sugrobov's acting replacement at GUEBiPK, [Maj. General Sergei Solopov](#), is a client of Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev's and the hope is that a quick cleansing of the stables might help fight off the

FSB and SKR alike.

As for the FSKN - one of the less powerful agencies - its director Viktor Ivanov has in the past tried to empire-build himself, presenting his agency as outside the fray and thus best able to police the secret policemen on the Kremlin's behalf. Perhaps sensing that its prospects of retaining a powerful domestic role are waning, the FSKN has now started to argue that it [needs its own external intelligence arm](#). In the process it has stepped on the toes of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), as well as the FSB, which in 2003 was granted the right to run its own overseas operations.

In short, the security community is bubbling with rivalries in a way it has not since 2006-7, and the prospects for increased political conflict are great. The current crisis with the Ukraine is also having unpredictable effects: rumours suggest Putin sacked a number of Ukraine analysts within the SVR and FSB for failing to predict Yanukovich's demise, while the Kremlin's focus on the Crimea may well embolden some other actors. Although Putin has played the siloviki against each other in the past, the danger is that agencies lose focus on their primary missions when they are busy fighting turf wars. Inevitably this could undermine the Kremlin at a time when domestic political opposition may be about to revive. It may also be a symptom of a weakness in the presidency. All the agency heads serve at the pleasure of the president, but likewise the security community is a powerful player in the inner elite politics behind the Kremlin walls. Since his inauguration, Putin's foreign policy triumphs and the pageantry of Sochi have masked a lack of direction and determination in domestic politics. A new turf war within the security apparatus would be a distinct sign that they now no longer fear Putin as once they did.

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