

# Medvedev's Feckless Government

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The composition of the new government makes for an interesting story.

First, the appointments were made only after a long delay. Before leaving for the Group of Eight summit at Camp David two weeks ago, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev left his list of candidates with President Vladimir Putin. At that point, Putin struggled hard over the choices and finally settled on the final list of names. But apparently only after Medvedev returned from Camp David did he learn what names he had actually submitted.

Second, the most important decision was actually the placement of Igor Sechin as head of Rosneft. On paper, Medvedev is the second-most powerful man in the government, but in reality it is Sechin. That is why many had predicted that Sechin would not be appointed to Medvedev's Cabinet. After all, how could a minister carry more political weight than the prime minister himself?

Sechin is now engaged strictly in business, just like fellow Putin cronies Gennady Timchenko, the billionaire head of oil trading giant Gunvor; Yury Kovalchuk, who controls Bank Rossiya and major media outlets; and Nikolai Shamalov, co-owner of Bank Rossiya.

This marks a new stage in the evolution of the political system. Major decisions are no longer made by the presidential administration but by Putin's friends, who are interested in only one thing: divvying up the country's largest assets among themselves.

Third, many prominent individuals from the previous government have been moved to the presidential administration where they remain close to Putin and the center of power, thus making the presidential administration more politically important than the Cabinet.

According to this construction, former Health and Social Development Minister Tatyana Golikova actually has more clout in her new sinecure post as Putin's point person to oversee the development of South Ossetia and Abkhazia than the new health minister, Veronika Skvortsova.

But there are two exceptions to this rule: the Interior and Defense ministries. The army takes its orders either from the commander-in-chief or from the defense minister, but never from their advisers.

That is why the appointment of Vladimir Kolokoltsev as the new interior minister and the decision to keep Anatoly Serdyukov in his post as defense minister are so important. It is interesting that Putin preferred Kolokoltsev, a relatively noncorrupt professional, by Russian standards, to the disastrous former interior minister, Rashid Nurgaliyev.

Fourth, the creation of two new ministerial posts — the Far East development minister and Open Government liaison — clearly demonstrates that the authorities are faced with two enormous problems: the depopulation and degradation of the Far East and the complete lack of communication between society and government. But those problems can only be solved through fundamental changes to Putin's existing political system. Instead, Putin is trying to create the impression that he is addressing these problems by creating yet another ministry.

One of the things that really enrages society is the abuse of ordinary citizens by beating them with truncheons, or when government officials and their friends, racing at high speed in their luxury cars, run over pedestrians as they try to cross the street — and with complete impunity, even though their crimes are captured on video cameras.

Apparently, Putin deals with that problem in his spare minutes between visits to his dachas and doling out state property to his friends. But he cannot resolve the problem because the problem is Putin himself.

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