

Report on Putin's 'Politburo 2.0' Sets Tongues Wagging

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President Vladimir Putin's face features prominently at the yearly pro-Kremlin youth camp on Lake Seliger. **Maxim Stulov**

The Kremlin is grooming influential figures such as liberal-leaning former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and nationalist Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin as possible leaders in the case of a political crisis, and President Vladimir Putin's system of governing resembles the Soviet Politburo more than the so-called power vertical, according to a new report by an influential think tank.

The 11-page report, prepared by the Minchenko Consulting Group, headed by political pundit Yevgeny Minchenko, roiled the political establishment Tuesday by identifying the precise makeup of the government's ruling clan.

The report calls Putin a powerful arbiter who manages relationships between members of ruling factions.

"Russian power is a conglomerate of clans and groups that compete with one another over resources," the report says.

Putin's clan is described as Politburo 2.0, referring to the name of the Communist Party's ruling body that authored all key decisions in the Soviet government.

Putin leads this group but is not the sole leader of the government, said one of the analysts who contributed to the report.

"Putin is a lighthouse keeper, but it would be strange to call him the lighthouse," Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said by telephone.

According to the report, the new Politburo presided over by Putin consists of eight political and business heavyweights who de-facto rule the country. The team includes Sergei Chemezov, head of state corporation Russian Technologies, Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, his deputy Vyacheslav Volodin, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, oil trader Gennady Timchenko, banker and media mogul Yury Kovalchuk, and Putin's staunch ally and Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin.

The eighth member is Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who the report says lost significant support after not running for a second presidential term this year. The "ruling tandem" of Putin and Medvedev no longer exists, according to the report, but Medvedev still has allies among the ruling establishment and could turn into a "center of attraction" for competing political factions.

The competition among various political groups is expected to grow under Putin because the new Politburo has an "unstable balance," the report says.

One example cited by the report is the competition for oversight of the oil and gas industry between Sechin, who chairs the presidential commission on the industry, and Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, who oversees the same issues in Medvedev's government.

In case of a national crisis, the report says, the ruling group might attempt to install Kudrin and billionaire former presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov as leaders of liberal-leaning groups that could take power.

The report does not identify exactly what is meant by a crisis, but it appears to refer to a scenario in which power must be handed over to the political opposition.

Some political analysts support the idea of making Kudrin, who has flirted with the opposition, a transitional president were Putin to resign under pressure from anti-Kremlin groups.

"His main advantage is being close to Putin, who trusts him," said Stanislav Belkovsky, an independent analyst and a Kremlin insider during Putin's first two presidential terms.

Unlike Kudrin, Prokhorov is not considered a serious figure in opposition circles, analysts said. Prokhorov's presidential campaign was advised by several members of "the Family," the inner circle of former President Boris Yeltsin.

"He is not an independent figure but would immediately switch sides" to join the clan likely to gain power in a regime change, said a senior opposition figure who spoke on condition of anonymity because he didn't want to unduly provoke the Kremlin.

According to the report, "Family" members and several liberal politicians, including Kudrin, are among a group of "Politburo candidates" who are less powerful than members of the ruling team.

"The Family" includes powerful players such as former Kremlin chief of staff Alexander Voloshin, business tycoon Roman Abramovich, and Anatoly Chubais, a former Kremlin powerbroker who now heads Rosnano, the state corporation.

Also included in that group is Tatyana Dyachenko, Yeltsin's daughter who, together with her husband, former Kremlin official Valentin Yumashev, supported Prokhorov's presidential bid, according to several veteran political analysts.

The Minchenko report says the Kremlin could also use Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin, formerly an oppositional nationalist politician who has become a Putin loyalist, to "hijack" the socialist platform in a crisis.

Maxim Kononenko, a pro-Kremlin spin doctor, said Rogozin might turn into a potential presidential candidate if he successfully resolves the problems of the country's military-industrial complex, which he has been tasked with in the government.

Despite the differences between members of the ruling clan, most of its members believe Russia's politics and economy will remain stable despite opposition protests, the report says, adding that the possibility of a reactionary, anti-Western group taking power is indeed unlikely.

A main goal of the ruling elite, it says, is to convince Russians and the West that its assets were obtained honestly.

The opposition has said it intends to expose the ill-gotten gains of corrupt leaders. "We will fight them in Western courts because they fear for their reputations," a senior aide to opposition leader Alexei Navalny who was not authorized to speak to the media said in an interview earlier this month.

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