

With Anti-Corruption Drive, Kremlin Adopts Navalny Tactic

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Analysts said that the Kremlin could be using an apparent anti-corruption drive to mimic the tactics of the opposition.

When President Vladimir Putin was asked in an interview last month about anti-corruption lawyer Alexei Navalny, he indicated that he thought opposition leaders had achieved little of substance.

“I’m not repudiating anyone, and I don’t want to cheapen the merits of any of the possible leaders of the opposition,” he said. But “besides sensation, clamor and putting on a show, a person must do something to demonstrate that he is capable of positive [results], and only after that can he aspire to be a leader of anything.”

But over the last two weeks, the Kremlin has indicated that it knows the value of Navalny’s anti-corruption campaigns, initiating an apparent drive of its own that experts say could have unpredictable consequences for the ruling elite.

Following the dismissal of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov on Nov. 6 amid a fraud scandal at a defense agency, allegations have surfaced regarding the misuse of billions of rubles connected to the implementation of the Glonass navigation system and the ambitious Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

Both Glonass and APEC were overseen by powerful members of the Kremlin elite: head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov, who formerly oversaw Glonass, and First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who was the government's point man for September's APEC summit.

Ivanov, a former KGB foreign intelligence officer, said he had known about the investigation into the misuse of Glonass funds but kept silent so as not to disrupt the case.

While it remains to be seen how far the Kremlin will go in its anti-corruption campaign against members of the elite, some government officials and pro-Kremlin politicians say the signal has been sent.

"Investigators understand that they are allowed to act, Putin understands that he needs to act, and those who oversee the budget have understood that they can't do this anymore," said Mikhail Barshchevsky, the liberal-leaning federal courts representative for the government, a position comparable to the U.S. solicitor general.

Barshchevsky made his comment on a TV exposé aired earlier this week about corruption at the Defense Ministry supply agency Oboronservis, the case linked to Serdyukov's dismissal.

The program, hosted by Arkady Mamontov, a journalist whose shows often signal a Kremlin-orchestrated campaign, detailed the enrichment of close members of Serdyukov's family who were allegedly involved in selling lucrative Defense Ministry property through Oboronservis.

Investigations of Oboronservis, members of whose management are accused of illegally selling \$95.5 million worth of real estate, land and shares at below-market rates, have led to the arrests of some company executives who were Serdyukov proteges. Oboronservis was chaired by Serdyukov until last year.

Serdyukov was replaced as defense minister by close Putin ally Sergei Shoigu, the longtime emergency situations minister, who has initiated a reshuffle in the Defense Ministry.

On Thursday, two more Serdyukov appointees, Yelena Kozlova and Dmitry Chushkin, were dismissed from their posts as deputy defense ministers and replaced by Ruslan Tsalikov, an ally of Shoigu, and Yury Borisov, a former deputy industry and trade minister who most recently held a senior post on a government military-industrial commission.

The order making the replacements was signed by Putin, who as president oversees all senior defense appointments.

The ouster of Serdyukov, who was unpopular with the public, has led to a rise in Putin's approval ratings, according to internal polls prepared for the Kremlin, RBC Daily reported Thursday, citing Kremlin officials.

Putin's approval rating rose to 51 percent by Nov. 10, a 6 percent increase from October,

according to a VTsIOM survey, although the number of respondents who said they disapproved of Putin also grew from 7 to 11 percent in November. The survey had 1,600 respondents and a margin of error of 3.4 percent.

Valery Fyodorov, head of the state-run VTsIOM polling agency, has said that the government's new anti-corruption drive could lead to a further increase in the president's ratings.

That campaign, which the Kremlin has said is not coordinated but simply typical anti-corruption work, has included inquiries into the theft of 6.5 billion rubles in federal funds earmarked for the troubled Glonass system and the recent report of misuse of 15 billion rubles allocated for construction projects for the APEC summit in Vladivostok.

Former Deputy Regional Development Minister Roman Panov, one of the people responsible for APEC summit preparation, was arrested late last week. While no arrests have been made in the Glonass case so far, Glonass' general director, Yury Urlichich, was fired over the weekend as chief engineer of the project.

Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies think tank, said the recent anti-corruption measures were a "warning sign" by the Kremlin.

"All the members of the elite have their own skeletons in the closet, so if some members go against others, those skeletons will start appearing," Makarkin said.

But Makarkin said he doubted that big heads would start to roll over corruption allegations. He noted as evidence Thursday's report that Serdyukov had been appointed adviser to defense corporation Russian Technologies, chaired by longtime Putin ally Sergei Chemezov, an apparent signal that the former minister will not be prosecuted as part of the Oboronservis case.

Head of the Indem Foundation think tank Georgy Satarov echoed Makarkin, using the analogy of Putin's fight against unruly governors in his first term.

"Deputies were targeted to put their bosses under restraints. The same is being done today," Satarov said.

Putin is known for protecting his loyalists even if they become embroiled in corruption scandals, but political analyst and former Kremlin insider Gleb Pavlovsky said the president is destroying his own rules of the game.

"We see that the turf war was legalized, and for the moment the president has allied himself with a clan fighting against Serdyukov. But in order to do this, he has to apply to other powerful groups to get support," said Pavlovsky, who added that the process within the system could spin out of control.

"The stakes are high," he said.

Observers have theorized that Serdyukov's ouster from the Defense Ministry was related less to corruption and more to infighting among powerful factions within the political elite, including over trillions of rubles in defense spending.

Some liberal columnists have suggested that by giving a green light to investigators to start cracking down on corruption, Putin is trying to steal one of the opposition's most prominent tactics, one championed by the charismatic Navalny.

“It seems possible that Putin wants to take away the banner of fighting corruption from all kinds of Navalnys,” Andrei Kolesnikov, a political columnist at opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, said in an article this week.

Navalny's anti-corruption projects, which address everyday problems such as damaged roads and the embezzlement of state funds, have become popular with middle-class Russians.

The opposition leader's recent initiative to fight for transparency in the utility sector even prompted federal inspector for the utilities sector Nikolai Vasyutin to address a letter to his regional subordinates regarding Navalny.

While calling the project “a clear attempt to discredit all levels of power,” Vasyutin urged his subordinates in a letter last week to provide Navalny campaigners with “fact-based” answers.

Snob magazine columnist Leonid Bershidsky said Putin had “transformed himself” into Navalny to steal the “trump card” from the opposition.

But while a majority of liberal experts called Putin's actions a form of warning to the elite, Bershidsky said Putin was driven by an ideological agenda and is interested in fighting corruption in defense-related sectors.

“These are priorities in Putin's model of the world,” he said.

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