

Same Old Kremlin, Same Old Surkov

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The decision by President Vladimir Putin to appoint Vladislav Surkov as a presidential aide for social and economic relations with Abkhazia and Ossetia came as a bombshell to the political establishment, surprising nearly everyone and shocking many. It also revealed a great deal about the way Putin rules Russia today.

First, Surkov was appointed shortly after he celebrated his 49th birthday, making the new job seem like a gift that Putin chose to bestow upon one of his key associates. For centuries, Russian politics has been heavily influenced by purely personal and emotional motives, and this appointment is no exception.

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Second, Putin consistently pursues an extremely conservative staffing policy, moving the same people from one senior post to another. In this case, Surkov replaced Tatyana Golikova, who had previously served as the health and social development minister and who will now head the Audit Chamber. Similarly, former Natural Resources Minister Yury Trutnev was recently named deputy prime minister and presidential envoy to the Far East Federal District. Putin reshuffles the same cast of players, rarely reaching beyond the tight circle of associates he put together in the early 2000s.

Rumor has it that Putin had a meeting with Surkov on Sept. 20 and issued a decree for his appointment the very same day.

Third, for anyone in Putin's inner circle, the formula for professional success is simple: maintain personal loyalty to the president and forget all thought of personal ambition, much less independent action. Surkov was dismissed from his deputy prime minister post on May 8, 2013 after he took exception to Putin's remark that the government — the management of which was his responsibility — had done a poor job of carrying out presidential decrees.

After that incident, Surkov disappeared from public view and refused to give interviews. He stoically withstood corruption charges brought against him in connection with his role in the Skolkovo project he had helped the government manage. In all things he demonstrated uncomplaining submissiveness, a refusal to blame the leadership for his troubles and acquiescence toward his fate and the will of the president. Now he is getting his reward.

However, those who do not uphold that standard of behavior quickly find themselves on the "outside." That is what happened with former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, who openly criticized the decision of the president and government to fire him in 2004, later becoming a leader of the "non-systemic" opposition. At the same time, even people such as Alexander Voloshin, who worked for now-vilified former President Boris Yeltsin, has been both quiet and loyal, thus remaining a member of Putin's inner circle.

Fourth, the informal lobbying network in which almost all leading Russian politicians are involved plays a major role, and it is often this informal power structure that is behind many Kremlin decisions regarding personnel, politics and the economy.

Surkov's primary resource in these secretive, Byzantine court-like games is Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Surkov played the decisive role in raising Kadyrov to his current post. For his part, Kadyrov refers to Surkov as his "sworn brother" and even has a portrait of Surkov hanging in his office in Grozny. After Surkov was dismissed from his job, Chechnya was the first place he visited. For many years, Chechens served as bodyguards for Surkov.

Following Surkov's dismissal, Kadyrov voiced public support for him and was the first to congratulate him upon his recent return to the Kremlin. Surkov will be responsible for Abkhazia and Ossetia, a fitting arrangement, because Kadyrov has been methodically trying to increase his political and economic influence over the whole of the Caucasus. Surkov's name is also linked to the attempt to "Kadyrovize" the Chechen authorities.

A group of powerful people stand behind Kadyrov, individuals with major financial and military resources who also exert a major influence on Putin, effectively strengthening Surkov's position as well. Not every Russian politician can boast such allies.

Fifth, a person's formal job title in Russia never matches the actual authority they wield. Kremlin administration head Sergei Ivanov recently stated that Surkov would only deal with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, those words have little meaning. It has been rumored that Surkov's appointment also came as an unpleasant surprise for the camp of presidential domestic policy chief and Deputy Prime Minister Vyacheslav Volodin, who had earlier replaced Surkov after the latter spent a full decade in that capacity. It is clear that with Surkov's vast experience, extensive political connections and ability to come up with imaginative strategies, he poses a potential threat to Volodin and his policies.

Putin has once again created dual power centers in domestic policy, making it clear for those who currently hold responsibility that if they do not achieve the desired outcome, Surkov will be reassigned those duties.

But most of all, Surkov's return indicates that Putin does not have any new people with new ideas. Society is rapidly evolving and political changes are picking up in speed and intensity, per force bringing the Kremlin-connected political elite into greater competition. Paradoxically, the return of old faces to the Kremlin only proves that changes are inevitable.

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