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## **THE RULING ELITE IN RUSSIA: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?<sup>1</sup>**

**KEYWORDS:** Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, elites, political security, conflict

**ABSTRACT:** The third Vladimir's Putin presidential term (2012-2018) was a significant period for the Russian Federation political security. Social protests, the annexation of Crimea, conflicts in eastern Ukraine and Syria, as well as economic sanctions and the deepening Russian isolationism - these are just some of the problems that Russian authorities had to face to ensure political stability. The aim of this article was to examine the changes and conflicts that occurred within President Putin's inner circle between 2012 and 2018. The research was conducted according to content analysis method. It revealed that in 2012-2018 the attempts to weaken the decision-making power elite as a whole failed.

The aim of this article is to examine the changes and conflicts that occurred within President V. Putin's immediate circle between 2012 and 2018. The tool used to determine the role of the most prominent members of the Russian elite involved in the state's decision-making mechanism was i.e. the Politburo 2.0 model, developed by the Russian analytical centre Minchenko Consulting. The research was conducted according to content analysis method. The main stage of the study was focused on comparing the position of individual members of the elite during the breakthrough moments of the third presidential term of Putin. The criteria taken into account included (1) having important institutional resources at the federal level (managing an institution); (2) control over several or more institutions of federal importance (such as enforcement agencies, financial bodies, political bodies, the media); (3) proximity to the President of the Russian Federation; (4) the ability to fill important state posts with their colleagues. The next stage focused on developing a measurement scale in which giving the members of the elite 18-20 points (maximum 5 points in each criterion related to the situations: 0 points – no influence, 1 point – very little influence, 2 points – little influence, 3 points – moderate influence, 4 points – great influence, 5 points – highly significant influence) meant that their position in the

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elite was “very strong” (they had huge decision-making power, and the decisions taken with their participation were strategic for the state), and 0-2 points reflected “very little influence” (they had no decision-making power, no important decisions were taken with their participation. The point values in between reflected the level of adjustment to the above requirements (3-6 points – very weak decision-making power, 7-10 points – weak, 11-14 points – moderate, 15-17 points – strong). The research was important because it determined Russia’s political security.

The main research hypothesis is that between 2012 and 2018 there were significant changes of Politburo 2.0 members, but the attempt to weaken its decision-making power as a whole failed. Moreover, during the period in question no group or member of the elite had a clearly dominant position within Politburo 2.0.

## 1. The ruling elite in Russia

There are several views on the Russian elite. The one that is most basic and also sufficient with regard to this article is the classic division into two/three fractions: *siloviki* (opting for i.e. total renationalisation of the energy sector and strategic industries, primacy of the state over society, regarding the West as a threat, militarism, respect for the Orthodox and patriotic values), liberals (postulating, among other things, increase in business freedoms and openness to foreign investments) and technocrats, led by D. Medvedev and A. Miller. Among the Russian elites there are also several influential figures that are not fully allied with any of these factions. Political life in the state is influenced also by political representation of business (Olszanecka 2018). It is also worth noting that individual factions are quite strongly divided internally, e.g. *siloviki* are made up by groups united around I. Sechin, N. Patrushev and V. Yakunin.

## 2. Putin’s return to the post of the President of the Russian Federation

The four years when Medvedev held the office of the President of the Russian Federation were full of great tensions among the Russian elite. The rivalry between the supporters of Medvedev (technocrats and A. Voloshin, A. Kudrin and their clientele) and the supporters of Putin (*siloviki* and Y. Kovalchuk and his supporters) intensified particularly during the pre-election period. After Putin’s win in the presidential election in 2012, his main efforts focused on strengthening his position and increasing control over the elites. The group of the president’s closest associates (called by a Russian analyst E. Minchenko Politburo 2.0, which refers to the Soviet nomenclature) comprised eight persons.

D. Medvedev, a technocrat, the Russian Prime Minister after Putin. After Putin's return to the post of the President of the Russian Federation, Medvedev for a short time had the strongest decision-making power among the members of the elite. It was rated at 14 points. The advantage was determined by his control over the Russian government. Moreover, at that time he could count on personal contact with President Putin. Medvedev had a cadre loyal to him and he was able to effectively lobby for his associates to receive lucrative offices. However, he did not enjoy significant support from the defence and law enforcement structures, the media, the financial sector and in the regions. Several months after the presidential election, Medvedev's decision-making power weakened significantly (2013 – 11 points; 2014 – 7 points). One of Putin's first moves in 2012 was aimed at limiting the influence of Medvedev's coalition. An example of this was the removal of V. Surkov from the office of the deputy prime minister in May 2012 (Pribilovsky 2010). What is more, many decisions taken during Medvedev's four-year term of office were reviewed later (e.g. the military reform) (Laurinavicius/Kasciunas/Karšanskas 2014).

I. Sechin, *siloviki*, until 2012 the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, later became the CEO of Rosneft. During the period in question, this *silovik* had a moderate position rated at 11 points. His advantage resulted from having good relations with Putin, control over the defence and law enforcement sector as well as moderate influences in the financial sector. He was also able to influence nominations to important posts. In the post-election period, Putin settled in his favour a dispute with A. Dvorkovich from the Medvedev coalition. The bone of contention was Dvorkovich's supervision of Rosneft within the government commission, and more precisely, privatization of a state hydroelectric power plant. Several months earlier, there was a rumour that Sechin was terminally ill, which resulted in his removal from the management boards of Rosneft and the Rosneftegaz holding company. After Putin's return to power, Sechin strengthened his control over these institutions (he regained both positions and was appointed secretary of the presidential energy commission) (Lough 2012).

S. Chemezov, *siloviki*, since 2007 the CEO of Rostekhnologii (since 21 December 2012 Rostekhnologii Corporation).

S. Ivanov, *siloviki*, the Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation. S. Ivanov and Chemezov decision-making power was ranked at 10 points. S. Ivanov achieved this result due to his function of the Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office, which was not only of institutional importance but also gave him unlimited direct access to Putin. Chemezov also enjoyed very good personal relations with Putin and had significant influence in the financial sector. Both politicians were to certain extent successful in promoting their associates – for example, they managed to appoint S. Prikhodko in place of Surkov (Sumskoy/Vinokurova/Savina et. al. 2012).

V. Volodin, not associated with any political faction, the first deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia. His decision-making power was rated at 9 points, which means weak. Due to his function and tasks entrusted to him, he had significant influence in the Russian parliament and the regions. He could count on occasional personal contact with Putin. He was able to promote his associates for important positions in the subjects of the Russian Federation.

Y. Kovalchuk, a businessman, shareholder in companies such as the Rossiya Bank, Media Group. His decision-making power was rated at 8 points. His good and frequent personal relations with the President of the Russian Federation gave him an advantage. He had a lot of influence in the financial and media sectors.

G. Timchenko, a businessman, shareholder in companies such as Gunvor, Novotek, Avia Group, Sibur, Transoil. His decision-making power was ranked at 7 points. He did not manage any federal institution, but he had good personal relations with Putin and influence in the financial sector.

S. Sobyainin, the leader of his own political faction, since 2010 the Mayor of Moscow (Minchenko 2013). The decision-making power of the Mayor of Moscow was ranked at 7 points. He had moderate institutional influence and could count on occasional contact with Putin.

Apart from the members of Politburo 2.0, there were 42 people in the close vicinity of the president, who could be conventionally divided into blocks: political, technical, administrative, defence and law enforcement, as well as business representatives. Only several months after Vladimir Putin's return to the post of the President, new people could be seen in the group of his close associates. V. Kolokoltsev became the Minister of Internal Affairs (defence and law enforcement block; formerly the Moscow Police Commissioner), and the aforementioned A. Belousov – the Minister of Economic Development (Sumskey/Vinokurova/Savina et. al 2012). Undoubtedly, in that period *siloviki* had the greatest say in the country's decision-making process.

### **3. Events which influenced the decision-making power of the members of Politburo 2.0**

#### **3.1. Change in the position of the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation**

Due to the corruption scandal in the state-owned company Oboronservis, A. Serdyukov (Russian Minister of Defense), who was personally involved in it, was replaced by S. Shoygu on 6 November 6 2012. The deposition of Minister Serdyukov, who was connected with Sechin's faction, strengthened the positions of S. Ivanov and Chemezov. Their decision-making power was then rated at 11 points (moderate).

Their success was related mainly to having influence on personnel nominations. Many months of their efforts led to the deposition of Anatoly Serdyukov and thus stopping the military reform unfavorable for them (Olszanecka 2017, 90).

Strengthening the positions of S. Ivanov and Chemezov was directly related to the weakening of the role of their rival – Sechin. His decision-making power during this period was rated at 8 points. This decrease was a consequence of internal disputes among *siloviki*, as a result of which Sechin ceased to be the leader of this group. Later (end of 2013) his position weakened further down to 7 points as Sechin fell into conflict with Putin over Rosneft's strategic plans (Foy 2018).

Shoygu, a man very loyal to Putin, very quickly he found himself among those who were taking the most important decisions in the country. From 2013, he was officially included in the Politburo 2.0 group. Initially, his decision-making power was weak (9 points) (Minchenko/Petrov 2014).

### **3.2. Regional elections in 2013**

On 8 September 8 2013, local elections were held in most regions of Russia, including the elections of governors, regional legislatures and mayors. The greatest surprise was the election of the mayor of Moscow – despite the victory Sobyenin in the first round (51.4%), the oppositionist A. Navalny obtained a surprisingly high result (27.2%).

After the regional elections, the position of Volodin strengthened. Its decision-making power was ranked at 10 points in 2013 and 12 points in 2014 as well as 2015. The politician oversaw the election campaign and was the person responsible for the process of reforming political parties (Minchenko/Petrov 2014). The strengthening of Volodin's position between 2013 and 2014 was related to his cooperation with the defence and law enforcement sector and tightening the contacts with Putin.

After the election Sobyenin's position improved for a short time (8 points). However, his success was regarded as insufficient, particularly because the initial surveys gave Navalny the support of about 10 percent. This situation weakened the position of the mayor of Moscow in the following years. However, he maintained moderately frequent contacts with the President as well as influence on state institutions and the financial sector.

### **3.3. Annexation of Crimea, war in Ukraine, economic sanctions**

The deterioration of the economic situation in the Russian Federation, which was a result of the economic sanctions, increased the competition for resources among the representatives of the elite. The influence of representatives of the military-

-industrial complex as well as defence and law enforcement structures increased since the state was involved in military operations abroad. Moreover, the first indications of Putin's policy aimed at reducing the role of long-time members of Politburo 2.0 became visible in this period. Among the people holding important positions in the state emerged two new groups. The first were the children of the ruling elite (e.g. B. Kovalchuk – Chairman of the Management Board of Inter RAO, D. Patrushev – member of the Gazprom Board of Directors<sup>2</sup>, A. Murow – Inter RAO, CIGRE) (Bieliszczuk/Legucka 2018), and the second group was constituted by technocrats promoted by Putin (D. Manturov – Minister of Trade and Industry of the Russian Federation, A. Novak – Minister of Energy of the Russian Federation, A. Wayno – Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office, and O. Belozyorov – President of the Russian Railways<sup>3</sup>).

At that time, S. Ivanov and Shoygu were the strongest members of Politburo 2.0. Their decision-making power was ranked at 15 points, i.e. it was considered strong. During this period, the institutional role of S. Ivanov strengthened, as he was personally responsible for overseeing the “Ukrainian case”. He also became the main representative of *siloviki* (Perukhova 2015). The strong position of the minister of defence was directly related to the situation in Ukraine and the successful incorporation of Crimea into the borders of the Russian Federation. The successes of Shoygu included winning the dispute with Medvedev over the launch of the project “Corporation for the Development of Siberia and the Far East”. The corporation was founded in May 2015. Moreover, Shoygu had the support of the defence and law enforcement sector as well as influence in the financial sector. The frequency of his contacts with the president also increased.

Military operations carried out by Russia stabilized Chemezov's position (again 11 points). He used the company Rostekhnologii as a tool of influence. Chemezov managed to improve the company's financial results by increasing the funds allocated by the state for the development of the defence industry in the light of the military reform and activities in Ukraine (Minchenko/Pietrow 2014).

Timchenko's position began to improve already in 2013 (8 points), and a year later it was ranked at 11 points, which meant that he was the most powerful businessman in Politburo 2.0. When he found himself on the list of those who were under sanctions imposed by Western countries, his image actually improved, and he compensated for external losses through contracts in Russia. He also strengthened his institutional influence, becoming one of the two Chairmen of the Russian-Chinese Business Council (Gould-Davies 2018, 15-19). Notably, in 2014 also Kovalchuk strengthened his position. His decision-making power was ranked at 10 points.

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<sup>2</sup> Since 18 May 2018, Minister of Agriculture.

<sup>3</sup> Appointing Belozyorov as President of the Russian Railways is regarded as lobbying success of Rotenberg.

What brought him success was the expansion of the media empire thanks to the agreement with Prof-Media. However, his formal influence increased as a result of effective lobbying for the reform of the Academy of Sciences. Moreover, Kovalchuk actively and strategically expanded his business interests (Denina 2016).

During the period in question, also Rotenberg – a longtime friend of the president, a businessman (shares in Stroygazmontazh, Avia) joined the group of Politburo 2.0 members. Initially, his decision-making power was weak (7 points), but he had the support of Putin as well as informal and financial influence in the implementation of infrastructure projects. The president found him useful due to his contacts in Europe (Gordyeyew 2014).

In the period of increased military activity in Ukraine, Putin's closest circle comprised 46 people. Most people represented defence and law enforcement as well as business groups. The defence and law enforcement bloc was strengthened by Y. Chaika – Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation. V. Yevtushenkov, detained on charges of money laundering, was removed from the group of influential businessmen (Levinsky 2014). Among those who gained the position were O. Sienko (General Director of the Uralvagonzavod) and A. Khloponin (Presidential Envoy of the North Caucasian Federal District) (Minchenko/Pietrow 2014). There was also a new tendency that among the close associates of the president appeared people representing law enforcement bodies, i.e. the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court V. Lebedev and the Chairman of the Supreme Court of Arbitration A. Ivanov (Kozenko/Artemev 2013). Moreover, V. Zubkov (Special Presidential Representative for cooperation with Gas Exporting Countries Forum) returned to the president's core group. Another new person was Y. Trutnev (Deputy Prime Minister of Russia and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District; regional elites) (Minchenko 2013).

### **3.4. War in Syria**

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russia has consistently supported Bashar el-Assad. This brought the increase in S. Ivanov's decision-making power – 16 points – as the *silovik's* responsibilities expanded to include also overseeing the military operation in Syria. Moreover, his control over the defence and law enforcement sector also increased since the anti-corruption campaign initiated in 2012 turned out to be a media success (high-profile arrests of mayors and governors). S. Ivanov was also elected to the board of directors of Rostelecom, which strengthened his business and financial influence.

The war in Syria, positively received by the public opinion in Russia, undoubtedly was strengthening the position of the minister of defence. However, his position was ranked at 14 points (a decrease from 15 points). The problem

of Shoygu was the “rehabilitation” of his predecessor (Serdyukov was appointed to a high position in Rostekhnologii) and the release of E. Vasilieva (Serdyukov’s mistress, involved in the Oboronservis corruption scandal), which resulted in the crisis of the minister of defence’s image (Petlin/Gromov 2016).

The war in Syria threatened the position of Chemezov, ranked at 9 points. He was accused of not being able to fully use the potential of military operations in which Russia was involved and the resulting defence resources. What is more, the integration of United Aircraft Company and United Shipbuilding Corporation was suspended (Bodner 2015). The defeat of his ally, the governor of the Irkutsk region S. Eroshchenko in local elections (Vasin 2015) and the elimination of the political project of M. Prokhorov (systemic opposition) also weakened the position of Chemezov’s team in the regions and in the party system. Apart from that, the *silovik* was involved in the Panama Papers scandal.

### 3.5. State Duma elections in 2016

State Duma elections in September 2016 were seemingly conflict-free. Important events in this period also included the anti-corruption campaign and the creation (and liquidation) of structures of defence and law enforcement organs (e.g. Rosgvardia). In 2016, due to the upcoming presidential elections, it was important for the elite members to show their loyalty to Putin. However, the president himself wanted to weaken the influence of Politburo 2.0 members so that he could make decisions independently. An example of this was the attempt to limit the role of Shoygu. Thus, for example, Rosgvardia was established, headed by Zolotov, the leader of one of smaller clans in the Kremlin. As the article shows later, this attempt failed – Shoygu maintained his strong position until the end of the third presidential term of Putin (Minchenko Consulting 2017).

At the time of State Duma elections, Medvedev (11 points) improved his position the most. He became closer to the president again. He created himself as one of the leaders of the “power party”, which would again win State Duma elections (Minchenko Consulting 2016).

The position of Volodin fell slightly (10 points). In 2016 it was rated as weak. His influence in the defence and law enforcement sector decreased, but he had a great impact on the make-up of the State Duma and also maintained extensive regional clientele (Minchenko Consulting 2016).



### **3.6. Changes in Politburo 2.0**

In 2016 S. Ivanov was dismissed from his position and thus excluded from Politburo 2.0. His dismissal may have been related to the US election scandal. It is also emphasized that the politician himself suffered a nervous breakdown after his son drowned during the holidays in the Arab Emirates (Galperovich 2016). The second big change was the removal of Timchenko from Politburo 2.0. His decision-making power had been decreasing since 2014.

In the period in question, the non-members of Politburo 2.0 who strengthened their positions included: N. Patrushev (he benefited from the proposal to unite the Federal Antimonopoly Service and the Federal Customs Service); Trutnev (contributed to the arrest of the governor of the Sakhalin region and oversaw the president's priority project, the development of the Far East region); Gref (who together with E. Nabiullin and A. Kostin oversaw the banking sector) (Minchenko Consulting 2016); Vaino and S. Kiriyenko (it was even expected that in the near future they could become full members of Politburo 2.0) and A. Gromov (First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of Russia). It is worth emphasizing that people who were dismissed from important posts were not fully removed from politics. They were offered new, less prestigious positions in which they could again play an important role in the country.

### **3.7. Infrastructural projects / reorganization of the energy sector**

In 2016/2017, in the face of the upcoming elections, members of Politburo 2.0 had to present a clear development project for the entire state or at least for themselves and their clientele in order to maintain their influence. In that period, Kovalchuk was an important figure (his decision-making power ranked at 13 points). He owed his position to the success of SOGAZ on the insurance market. The businessman also managed to push through the nomination of Kirienko to the board of Roscosmos. On the other hand, the reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which he supported, was regarded by the media as a failure and had a negative impact on his image (Lizer 2013). Moreover, the 2016 removal of Timchenko from Politburo 2.0 put an end to the informal Kovalchuk-Timchenko coalition.

Sechin's decision-making power was ranked at 9 points. The removal of S. Ivanov from Politburo 2.0 improved the position of the *silovik*. His decision-making power began to grow from 2014. His relations with President Putin gradually improved after a misunderstanding regarding Rosneft's new strategy. However, Sechin could not protect his associates against dismissal (the president removed A. Nekipelov and N. Laverov from the board of Rosneft and appointed Belousov in their place). In 2016 Sechin again increased his influence in the energy and

financial industry (especially by implementing a scenario convenient for Bashneft and by a number of favorable personal nominations) (Minchenko Consulting 2016).

Rotenberg's decision-making power was ranked at 10 points. He actively used his good relations with the president to expand his own influence. He showed a high level of loyalty by overseeing the construction of the Crimean Bridge, a post which Timchenko refused. It helped him acquire new infrastructure projects (e.g. acquisition of the Sheremetyevo airport control package, successes on the market of alcoholic beverages) (Levinsky/Maetnaya 2015).

Sobyanin's position strengthened slightly and was rated at 8 points. The politician focused on Moscow issues and during the period in question was not involved in decisions about bigger projects. The position of the Mayor of Moscow was weakened by protests against the malfunctioning health care system (Minchenko Consulting 2016).

### 3.8. Pre-election period

During the pre-election period, Medvedev came to the leading position among the members of Politburo 2.0. His decision-making power was strong, ranked at 15 points. On the one hand, he was the most experienced member of the ruling elite as he had been a prime minister and a president. On the other hand, Medvedev proved on numerous occasions his loyalty to Putin, who in 2016 appointed Medvedev's protégé, S. Gorkov, to reform the VEB bank (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

The position of Shoygu was also strong (15 points). He was the minister of defence of a state conducting military operations outside its borders. Shoygu also had a plan for reforms which assumed the merger of the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters. He had regular personal contacts with the president.

Chemezov also strengthened his position (14 points). He was close to President Putin. He was able to promote his associates for high state positions (such as Manturov, and the governors D. Ovsyannikov, A. Alikhanov and G. Nikitin). Together with Rotenberg he is believed to have effectively lobbied for Vaino's candidacy for the post of the Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office in 2016 (previously Vaino was a member of the supervisory board of Rostekhnologii). Chemezov was one of the three people with the greatest power in the FSB, along with the FSB director A. Bortnikov and Sechin. In October 2017, with the help of the FSB, Chemezov forced the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs A. Makhonov to resign from the post. Officials in conflict with the head of Rostekhnologii were charged with corruption (Russia Monitor 2018).

Kovalchuk's decision-making power was also ranked at 14 points. He was considered an informal supervisor of the research sector and innovative economy (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

A great increase was observed in the position of Sobyenin. His decision-making power was ranked at 11 points. The Mayor of Moscow had a clear objective for the entire period of the fourth presidential term of Putin. It was a project of liquidation of old blocks of flats in Moscow, which was to radically change the image of the city. Sobyenin remained the second candidate for the office of prime minister (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

The positions of Sechin, Volodin and Rotenberg weakened during the pre-election period. Their decision-making power was ranked at 9 points. Sechin mobilized a broad coalition against him, which was the result of his turbulent management style. Moreover, his influence in security services decreased after the liquidation of the Federal Drug Control Service and the release of several officers of the Investigative Committee. The role of Volodin decreased with the finalization of the reforms. However, he maintained an informal influence on political parties and regions. The fact that the Western sanctions were imposed also against Rotenberg, the general cooling down in relations with the West and the challenges which new projects in the East posed did not affect his position negatively (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

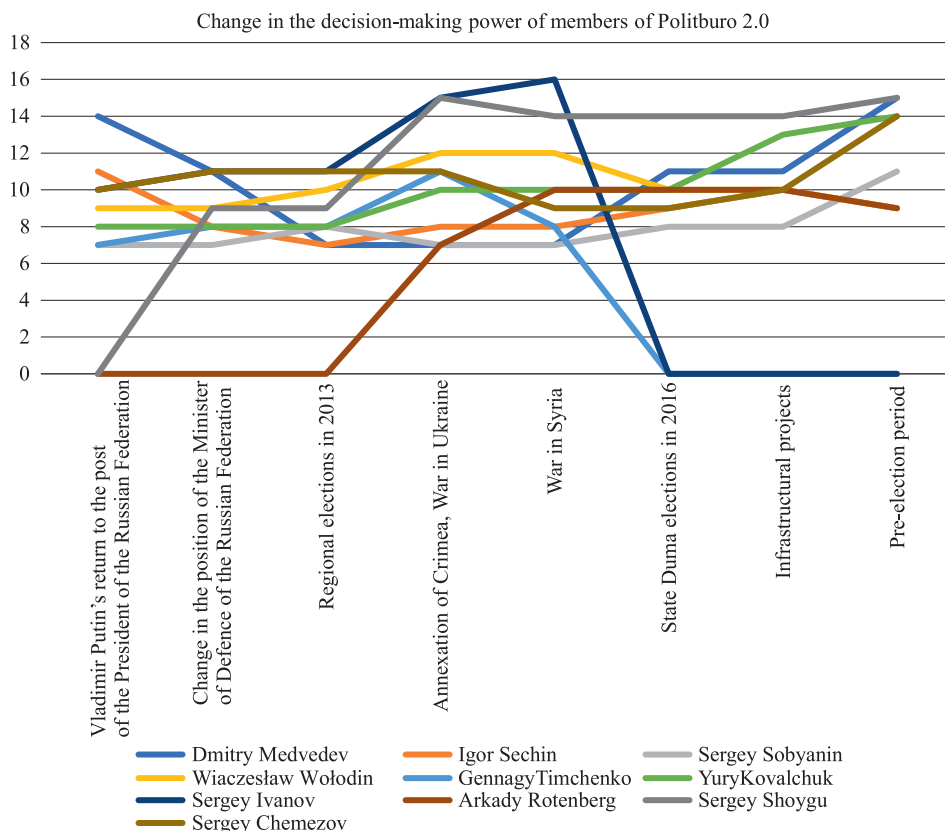
Among the serious candidates for Politburo 2.0 in 2017, those who maintained their position were Vaino (technocrat), Kiriyenko (technocrat), R. Kadyrov (regional authority), Gref (business), Kudrin (political bloc), and Zolotov (*siloviki*). Trutnev (regional authority) was considered a contender for the role of a technocratic prime minister, endowed with a strong will and ability to implement projects. Ivanov and Timchenko improved their position. In wider circles of power, technocrats had a slight quantitative advantage over *siloviki* (Minchenko Consulting 2018).

#### **4. Conclusions**

The following graph presents the change in decision-making power of the closest associates of Putin during his third presidential term. The analysis revealed that in 2012–2018 the attempts to weaken the decision-making power of Politburo 2.0 as a whole failed. Among most notable changes were the exclusion of Ivanov and Timchenko as well as the inclusion of and Rotenberg. During the 6 years, the circle of the closest associates accepted two new people, who represented the same groupings as the people who left the circle.

Putin managed to maintain the balance of influence. No member of Politburo 2.0 managed to achieve a “very strong” position (over 18 points). Ivanov was closest to this just before he got excluded from the president's core group. In 2014–2015,

the president took a number of actions aimed at weakening the influence of the members of Politburo 2.0 and gaining greater autonomy in the decision-making process. The people mainly affected by restrictions belonged to defence and law enforcement groupings. Putin's circle started to include young technocrats, who in 2018 outnumbered *siloviki*.



Source: own work based on i.a. the data published by Minchenko Consulting

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