Russia: Rumors Indicate Security Services Shift

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Summary
Rumors persist about continued restructurings and consolidations among the security services within Russia. The shifts are part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's attempts to make the security organizations more effective and to limit the power of many figures among the security circles' elite in light of the crisis in Ukraine and Moscow's standoff with the West.

Analysis
In 2014, Russia's security services suffered a series of failures regarding the uprising in Kiev, struggling to rally parts of eastern Ukraine and to read the West's willingness to unite over meaningful sanctions. These failures weakened the security services, the foundation of Putin's
power in Russia. Particularly hampered was the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia's largest security institution. The FSB is tasked with internal intelligence, and its sister agency, the Foreign Intelligence Service, is responsible for external intelligence. However, the Kremlin considers Ukraine — like many other former Soviet states — strategically critical to Russia's national security and territorial integrity, making the Ukraine crisis an internal problem and the FSB's responsibility.

The security services' failures also changed how countries along Russia's periphery view Moscow. Russia resurged into its former borderlands for nearly a decade, and its security services were widely seen as infallible. The events in Ukraine changed this view.

Restructuring
In mid-2014, rumors spread in Russian media that Putin had purged the FSB of those intelligence operatives and analysts who faltered in handling Ukraine. In November, Putin said the FSB would undergo "restructuring," though he was vague in discussing the changes. Over the past week, hints of this restructuring have appeared. Russian media group RBC reported that Putin has decided that smaller security services — the Federal Drug Control Service and Federal Migration Service — would be consolidated under the Interior Ministry, one of the FSB's primary competitors within the security circles. These two institutions previously had strong connections within the FSB; the Federal Drug Control Service's current chief was a KGB general.

Putin's first strategy is to streamline many of the security processes in Russia while focusing the FSB on its primary directive: internal intelligence and counterintelligence. The FSB's influence and focus have spread throughout many institutions, such as the drug control service and migration service. The consolidation of these smaller groups under the Interior Ministry could serve to purge the FSB and hone its focus to prevent any more failures that weaken Putin's power base or authority.

A second strategy could be to continue sidelining members of the security elite who could eventually challenge Putin's position. Putin's control over Russia is fairly solid. In the latest polls by Levada, his approval rating has lingered at around 86 percent, and 54 percent of Russians believe that no one could replace Putin — a doubling of support over the past year.

Many Powerful Figures
However, Putin still has concerns for his future, especially as hardships grow in Russia. Among the
many powerful figures within Putin's inner circles who could compete with the Russian president is Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev. Patrushev commands a great deal of loyalty among the FSB's ranks. He earned a reputation for organizing counterterrorism operations in Russia's northern Caucasus and was rumored to have organized many of the FSB's activities abroad, such as the assassination of former FSB agent turned critic Alexander Litvinenko. In 2008, Putin removed Patrushev as head of the FSB and moved him to the nominally important Security Council, which is considered more of an organizational role than a position of power.

In December, Stratfor received a report that Patrushev would be fired. However, because he has retained his post, it is likely that Putin decided to keep Patrushev in place because of his influence within Russia's security circles but limit his abilities. Multiple reports also surfaced in Russian media in November and January that Putin is backing Deputy Interior Minister Vladimir Zolotov and could give him the top Interior Ministry spot. Zolotov is the former longtime head of the Federal Protective Service, Putin's personal bodyguards, much like the U.S. Secret Service. Zolotov also was the bodyguard to Putin's mentor, Anatoly Sobchak, and is one of Putin's judo sparring partners. He is considered directly loyal to Putin and not tied into any other security circles or elites in the Kremlin.

The FSB has long influenced the Interior Ministry in an attempt to wield the ministry's large paramilitary and police forces. However, the Interior Ministry has begun acting more independently. Making Zolotov the ministry's chief could be another signal that Putin wants to ensure that the FSB focuses on its prime directive and that members of the FSB elite, including Patrushev, do not expand their influence.