

After Surkov

By [Georgy Bovt](#)

May 14, 2013



Although it was certainly a surprise when Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov resigned exactly one year after President Vladimir Putin's third inauguration, observers should have probably anticipated this event a long time ago. In fact, Surkov's real resignation occurred more than a year ago, when he stepped down as deputy head of the Kremlin administration, a post in which he acted as the chief ideologue of domestic policy. In all likelihood, Surkov's abilities and ambitions could not be contained within the narrow limits of his most recent job as deputy prime minister, and it is no wonder that he was therefore also given responsibility for overseeing relations with religious organizations, modernization and the Skolkovo project. But even those duties were meager compared to the power and influence he previously held.

As a result of his demotion a year ago, Surkov's opponents constantly suspected him of trying to plot revenge to get his powerful role back. This may explain why nearly all of the major figures with whom Surkov worked in the administration have been removed from their posts. Surkov himself has clearly been under constant pressure from unseen sources, and that same pressure has been building up against the whole government.

Many people have accused the government of being ineffective, and Putin himself has made the angry accusation that it is unable to carry out decrees concerning social programs that he issued a full year ago. At the same time, the Kremlin ignores arguments that those decrees are impossible to enact in a stagnating economy, and that political and institutional reforms are necessary to spur economic growth. It was clear that a scapegoat would eventually have to be found to break this impasse, and Surkov made an excellent candidate for this role. During a meeting with Cabinet members on April 26, Putin was visibly annoyed when Surkov disagreed with Putin's appraisal that the government is ineffective. After this, Surkov probably understood that it was time to submit his resignation.

I was surprised that Surkov gave a largely political speech at the London School of Economics on May 1. He spoke about the necessity of a two-party system and defended the Skolkovo project that has come under attack from investigative bodies for alleged corruption and misuse of funds. Surkov raised sensitive political issues even though he was all but forbidden from engaging in politics after he was dismissed from the presidential administration. In addition to the London speech, Surkov publicly clashed with Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin over the criminal charges against Skolkovo, making it clear that he felt he had nothing to lose anymore.

Yet Surkov's departure will not have a major impact on domestic policy because the new course was already set one year ago, when Vyacheslav Volodin replaced him as head of the presidential administration. Volodin's political program has already resulted in laws placing limits on nongovernmental organizations, protest rallies and other rights and freedoms, as well as in controls on the elite that bar officials and politicians from opening bank accounts abroad and purchasing foreign stocks and bonds. The authorities decided to create the impression it is trying to fight corruption among government officials to co-opt that battle from the opposition.

At that same time, however, the Kremlin is taking a much harder stance against the opposition than Surkov had pursued. During his heyday, Surkov had employed PR techniques such as having Nashi harass the British ambassador, staging picket lines outside the Estonian Embassy and burning books by Vladimir Sorokin. Those tactics have been replaced with far more aggressive methods, such as criminal charges and prison sentences against opposition leaders and activists. Undesirable NGOs are no longer simply subjected to media smear campaigns. Now investigators show up at their offices with search warrants. Opposition leaders are no longer baited with prostitutes so that the authorities can post compromising videos of them on the Internet. Now they are held in pretrial detention or under house arrest on criminal charges. The new thinking is that all of Surkov's clever PR ploys were a waste of time and money and did not stop tens of thousands of people from turning out for protest rallies in December 2011. Apparently, Putin decided in the end that Surkov's schemes were no longer effective and that it was necessary to carry out a more serious crackdown on the opposition.

Furthermore, the hard-liners who replaced Surkov have focused on the conservative masses who respond well to the national leader's paternalistic governing style. Rather than engaging the intelligentsia as Surkov did, the Kremlin has focused on supporting conservative family values and the Russian Orthodox Church, while at the same time stoking anti-Western and anti-U.S. sentiments.

Meanwhile, it is already clear that the government of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev will be dissolved before the next presidential election. Medvedev will never again serve as Putin's successor. It appears that Putin was jealous of Surkov's strong devotion to Medvedev and his liberal policies when he was president from 2008-12. Now Putin has removed that source of jealousy.

When Surkov left the presidential administration, he eloquently quipped: "I am too odious for this brave new world." I fear that few in the Kremlin understood the full meaning of his reference to British author Aldous Huxley's famous dystopian novel. After all, it is increasingly out of fashion among today's decision-makers to read such serious books.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/14/after-surkov-a24031>