In this paper, I present and discuss some preliminary social network analysis of Russian elites. Some findings, such as the diversity of relatively unknown individuals with high betweenness (“gatekeeping”) centrality, jump out of analysis of this data. Yet the primary focus of this paper is to present some careful thinking about what we who study Russian politics can learn from social network analysis, as well as some ways that the network study of Russian elites is pushing the boundaries of how social network analysis is applied in political science.

While formal, quantitative social network analysis is relatively new to political science, the Russian case offers an intriguing set of conditions for social network analysis. The federal nature of the Russian state, despite all efforts to organize it into ‘verticals of power’ and ‘federal okrugs,’ provides for a wide array of regime characteristics at the region level, numerous miniaturized local centers of power, and great variation in staffing, promotion, and cadre organization. Most importantly, the lack of a political party able to thoroughly organize politics within federal and regional structures hints that a much wider array—a diverse amalgam of personal backgrounds, power centers, coalitions, and professionalization—of network characteristics may be observable in Russia than in other cases like China that have been studied in political science with social network analysis.

More concretely, social network analysis is immediately informative for the study of Russian politics—as demonstrated in results presented in this paper coming from analysis of a new data collection project being undertaken with colleagues at the Higher School of Economics. At its core, the data set endeavors to encompass the universe of mid- to high-level officials in the
Russian federal government from 2000 to 2012. For example, the paper presents somewhat surprising findings that Vladimir Putin is rarely the most ‘connected’ individual in this dataset. Indeed, Putin’s connectedness in the regime has fallen over time when compared to other prominent individuals—no matter the network centrality metric we look at. Such social network analysis as is presented in this paper may prompt researchers to examine relatively unknown figures who appear prominently in this quantitative analysis or to look differently at familiar actors.

When combined with existing non-network data and expert knowledge, network analysis informs a more general investigation into the roles that elite coalitions, information, authority, and informal vs. formal institutional connections play in an authoritarian regime like Russia’s. For example, shifts in coalitions over time, strengthening of personal ties across formal institutional boundaries, or changes in the density of connections within a particular bureaucratic structure could all indicate variation in regime strategies for survival. Overall, social network analysis bolsters our understanding of the individuals within Putin’s regime. By objectively examining ties between officials—a much larger set of mid- and high-level officials than is easily available to a researcher—powerful and influential actors can be identified where they might normally fall through the cracks.

This paper also highlights additional possible benefits of social network analysis in the study of Russian politics. In addition to providing a new look at the internals of an authoritarian regime like Russia’s, it also gives us insights into what factors drive promotion (or demotion) in this opaque system. Rather than relying on anecdotal or partial data, researchers within Russian politics can engage with the universe of important governmental officials. This broadens the scope of questions than can be asked and reliably answered.
In this paper, I also develop some potential contributions that social network analysis in the study of Russian can contribute to broader political science research. I discuss at least three such opportunities that present themselves: multilevel analysis prompted by Russia’s organizational diversity, expanded sets of research questions, and a fuller integration of time into network analysis.

In sum, I conclude that, far from being mere quantitative Kremlinology, social network analysis in Russian politics offers numerous opportunities—both for the study of Russian politics and for political science itself.