The showdown in the Conservative camp took place on a far greater scale for a number of reasons. First, within the logic of factional struggle and partly due to Moon’s policies, “People’s Power” has in part become an alliance of all who oppose Moon, making the division between factions deeper and more acute. There are classic conservatives like Hong Joon-pyo, who became Yoon’s main rival in the primaries. There is a fairly important bloc of notional center-rightists, which includes the current leader of the party, 36-year-old Lee Jun-seok. And then there is Yoon Suk-yeol, who happened to be a conservative against his will, and a number of other people with similar backgrounds: defectors from the Democratic Party who disagreed with certain aspects of Moon Jae-in’s policies. Special mention should be made of a person belonging to the Conservative Party, the 80-year-old Kim Jun-in. The elderly politician worked for both Moon Jae-in and Park Geun-hye and was interim leader of the conservatives for a period of time, but left the post after the successful local elections of 2021. All of these factions are in a constant tug-of-war with each other, thus putting Yoon Suk-yeol in an awkward position, as choosing to favor one faction or one group could mean losing support of the other.

This is further complicated by the competition of the leaders. On the one hand, there is the leader of the party, who, formally, is in charge. On the other hand, the presidential candidate and his electoral headquarters are a parallel structure that would love to take that power for themselves. In this case, if the candidate loses, they would usually
resign and may even leave the party for a while, but if they win, the new president will stand taller than the party leader, exacerbating the rivalry between the two, especially if these people belong to different factions. Which is, indeed, the case here.

That is why the process of consolidation was so arduous to begin with, and at certain twists and turns resembled Korean drama shows.

At first, Yoon Suk-yeol made an effort to form an election committee and tried to get Kim Jung-in to head it. On November 21, it was announced that it would be led by Kim Jung-in, but co-chaired by Lee Jun-seok and Kim Ben-jung, the former interim head of the Freedom of Korea Party, which was the name the People’s Power Party used in one of its iterations.

However, Kim had his own ideas about how Yoon Suk-yeol should behave and what he should do. So in parallel with the standard electoral committee, Yoon set up a separate committee called Sae Sidae (New Era), where former democrats such as former Democratic Party head Kim Han-gil and other defectors from the left-wing camp came together under Yoon’s immediate leadership. In Yoon’s mind, it was a platform for the hesitant, the liberals and the centrists.

As with the Democrats, appointments were often accompanied by quick resignations. For example, on December 5, a dermatologist by the name of Ham Ik-byun left the committee seven hours after his unacceptable remarks became known. In 2014, Ham said in a media interview that women should only have ¾ of the rights granted to men, because they do not have compulsory military service, and only women who have more than two children deserve equal rights with men.

But the gender issue became an even bigger problem. More precisely, the issue with feminists. The fact is that Lee Jun-seok, who attracted many men in their 20s and 30s to the party, did so by claiming that policies based on feminism discriminate against young men. Yoon, on the other hand, was trying to attract female voters more actively, since after a series of sex scandals with high-ranking members of the Democratic Party, many women went to the Conservatives at least because of the lack of a third party. However, an attempt to appoint Lee Soo-jeong, a feminist and security and human rights expert, as the next co-chair of the election committee on November 29 caused such a strong opposition from Lee Jun-seok that on November 30 Lee cancelled all public events, turned off his phone and left a Facebook post, saying “In that case, this is where it stops.”

Yoon and Lee didn’t fully reconcile until December 3. But two weeks later, another conflict sparked between Yoon and Lee, once again over a “woman issue.” This time it was a well-known 31-year-old feminist politician, Shin Ji-ye, who currently heads the nonprofit Korean Women’s Political Network and once ran for mayor of Seoul and a seat in the National Assembly for the Green Party. Yoon invited her to join the Sae Sidae committee. Shin’s appointment, however, provoked a negative reaction within the Conservative party due to her conflict with Lee Jung-seok, whom she once compared to Adolf Hitler.

On December 21, Lee Jun-seok announced his resignation from the election commission after Cho Soo-jin, the campaign’s social media communications manager, dis obeyed his order.

All these scandals inevitably damaged Yoon’s approval rating, and by the end of December, he once again became the subject of a meme. At a campaign event, Yoon Suk-yeol said: “The Democratic Party candidate wants us to have a debate. Am I an idiot?” Many Twitter posts mocked the candidate’s line, and when a user made a poll asking “is Yoon an idiot?,” 97.8% of respondents said “Yes,” and only 2.2% said “No.”

In this context, figures like Hong Joon-pyo came out saying that Yoon is ruining everything and that the Conservatives could only be saved by replacing the candidate (with Hong, of course). However, even Lee Jun-seok said that Yoon Suk-yeol’s replacement was completely out of the question, and that the party would lose the presidential race if he was replaced.

As a result, when Lee Jae-myung took the lead amid such discord in the Conservative camp, Kim Jung-in resorted to extreme measures on January 3, declaring that the committee would undergo a total restructuring and the election campaign would be suspended for the time being until the reforms were completed.

On January 5, Yoon Suk-yeol announced the dissolution of the election committee but approved Kim Jung-in’s resignation as chairman of the election committee and the appointment of MP Kwon Young-se to that position.

On January 7, in a Facebook post, Yoon Suk-yeol promised to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.
The message went viral and provoked various reactions among political parties, but more important to the author is that until a certain time this demand was Lee Jun-seok’s “shtick”. Yoon himself in October 2021 wanted to reorganize the ministry sooner, “to better realize equality between men and women.”

Up ahead, however, Yoon has a rather unpleasant obstacle in the form of the debates. Both one-on-one with Lee Jae-myung and the other candidates. These are designed for professional politicians, who must be able to speak intelligently on any topic, demonstrating a broad outlook and making promises. But public speaking is a weakness of Yoon’s, for his every a slip of the tongue is immediately interpreted in the worst possible way, and dissected into satirical memes; and whether his advisors will manage to get him up to speed is a matter for debate.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that further quarrels will not occur. Shin Yul, a political science professor at Myongji University, believes that Yoon and Lee have not come to a reconciliation with each other, but simply settled their conflicts for their own political purposes.

Nevertheless, so far Yoon has managed to overcome a severe intra-party crisis.

Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 