

## Putin's new National Guard: bulwark against mass protests and illoyal elites

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# Putin's New National Guard

**Bulwark against Mass Protests and Illoyal Elites**

*Margarete Klein*

**A new Russian security organ was created on 3 July 2016. The National Guard takes over the interior ministry's internal troops and police special forces and places them directly under the president's control. The new force's remit ranges from public order through counter-extremism and counter-terrorism to assistance in territorial defence and border protection. This reform represents the most significant restructuring of Russia's internal security organs in more than ten years, and exposes Putin's concerns over the robustness of his political system in face of persistent economic crisis and upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. In this context the National Guard can serve not only as an instrument of repression against possible mass protests, but also as a means of disciplining potentially illoyal elite groups.**

On 5 April 2016 President Vladimir Putin ordered the founding of the National Guard. The corresponding legislation passed the State Duma and Federation Council on 22 and 29 June respectively, and came into force on 3 July.

The National Guard will comprise some 350,000 to 400,000 members. Its backbone is formed by the "internal troops" previously controlled by the interior ministry, a paramilitary force of 170,000 to 180,000 including conscripts. They are joined by heavily armed police special forces (about 30,000), including the OMON riot police and the OMSN/SOBR counter-terrorism units. The National Guard has also taken over administrative and training facilities as well as the federal enterprise Okhrana, which supplies security and protection

services for companies and private individuals.

## **Tasks, Powers, Equipment**

Under the new legislation, the National Guard's principal responsibility is "protecting public order and security". This means dissolving unauthorised demonstrations, suppressing mass unrest and enforcing curfews during any state of emergency. It is planned to involve National Guard forces in fighting extremism and terrorism, and they can also be deployed to reinforce border protection and for territorial defence.

The National Guard's powers extend from identity checks, house searches and detention through to robust coercive measures. If the lives or safety of its members or

the public are endangered, the National Guard may fire into crowds without prior warning. They have access to military and specialist equipment for fighting extremism and terrorism and tackling hostage situations. The National Guard accordingly possesses a broad arsenal ranging from non-lethal means (such as sonic weapons) through machine guns to armoured personnel carriers and rocket-propelled grenades.

### **Anti-Terrorism and the World Cup**

According to President Putin, the National Guard had to be established in order to fight terrorism more effectively. Russia is indeed one of the European countries worst affected by terrorist attacks. Since the Chechen wars of the 1990s and 2000s, lack of economic perspective has turned the North Caucasus in particular into a region of unrest, within and out of which numerous acts of terrorism have been committed. In recent years thousands of Islamist fighters have left the North Caucasus to fight in Syria and Iraq. They had come under pressure after Ramzan Kadyrov consolidated his power as head of the Chechen Republic and Russia conducted successful anti-terrorism operations in the region. There are reports that Russian security forces actually assisted Islamists to leave ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. While this may have brought short-term relief, the move risks blow-back when they return – especially with Russia now firmly in the Islamists' sights since its intervention in Syria began in September 2015. Moreover, protecting the 2018 football World Cup in Russia will require considerable resources.

However, even if fighting terrorism represents a central challenge, that alone is not adequate reason to create a National Guard. That purpose would have been served equally well by expanding the interior troops and police special forces within the interior ministry. Above all, fighting terrorism requires intelligence and investigatory powers that the National Guard – unlike

the police and the domestic intelligence service FSB – does not possess. In counter-terrorism the new structure functions merely as a force multiplier.

### **Fear of Social Unrest or a “Russian Maidan”**

The National Guard possesses greater importance as protection against internal unrest and mass demonstrations. Since the “colour revolutions” of the 2000s and the Arab Spring of 2011, and above all since the protests against election manipulation in Moscow and St Petersburg in 2011/2012, the Kremlin's security discourse has been dominated by the spectre of a “Russian Maidan”.

At present there is little sign of imminent mass protests in the Russian population. In a survey by the Levada Center in June 2016 only 11 and 8 percent respectively said they would participate in social or political demonstrations. And since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Putin's approval ratings have returned to levels consistently above 80 percent.

Yet the Russian leadership faces great domestic challenges. The basis of its legitimacy, its ability to raise the standard of living of broad sections of the population, is crumbling. Compounded by a low oil price and the impact of Western sanctions, the failure to push through economic structural reforms has led to a collapse of the rouble, rising prices and falling real incomes. In view of dwindling state revenues and reserves, there will be no alternative to either increasing taxes or making cuts in welfare and education.

If the leadership fails to provide the expected socio-economic outputs, hitherto isolated social protests could increase. Mass demonstrations by the liberal opposition – of the kind seen in 2011/2012 – appear less likely, as the liberal camp is marginalised and lacks popular leaders. But issues like corruption and nationalism could still inject political demands into social protests. One potential trigger could be elections to

the State Duma in September 2016, and above all the presidential election in spring 2018.

With the National Guard the Kremlin has created an effective, broader-based instrument for deterring and repressing possible (mass) protests, which was previously the responsibility above all of the OMON special forces. From the Kremlin's perspective this would be especially advantageous if a state of emergency had to be declared to contain growing, coalescing protests. But the National Guard is only *one* element in a series of measures by which the Moscow leadership seeks to protect itself against threats "from below". In order to prevent mass protests arising in the first place, legislation imposing state controls on NGOs and media outlets and restricting the activities of the opposition has been tightened since 2012.

### **Disciplining the Elites**

The National Guard is not only an organ of repression against possible protests in the population. It functions even more strongly as the president's personal instrument for disciplining the elites. Their loyalty to Putin has been rooted in his ability to distribute economic resources and political offices and to operate as the ultimate mediator recognised by all factions. But the economic crisis has reduced the wealth available to distribute, while the president has curtailed his own room for manoeuvre since 2012 by weakening the reformist technocrats and one-sidedly strengthening the *siloviki*, politicians and officials with a background in the military and security services. While an open palace revolution may be unlikely, Putin's power vertical could gradually erode if conflicts within the elites escalate or individual groups build links bypassing the president. Elite groups turning their backs on the president might be tempted to instrumentalise social or political protest potential.

The National Guard strengthens Putin's power over elite groups. It is answerable to

him directly and led by one of his closest confidants, Viktor Zolotov. Both come from the KGB, and have known each other since the early 1990s. From 2000 to 2013 Zolotov headed the president's security service. In the event of conflict with parts of the elite, Putin thus enjoys direct recourse to a loyal paramilitary organisation, whose up to 400,000 members make it larger than the army or the FSB.

Furthermore, the process of redistributing powers and capacities associated with the founding of the National Guard itself strengthens Putin's position as the decisive mediator. Reshuffling the polycentric security structures exacerbates institutional rivalries and insecurities. The overlapping nature of the individual institutions – with the National Guard on the one side and the FSB (border protection, counter-terrorism), interior ministry (public security) and defence ministry (territorial defence) on the other – creates potential for conflict. Other institutions are likely to be jealous of the National Guard receiving its own – as yet unspecified budget – and possibilities for enrichment, for example through the integrated state-owned company Okhrana.

The biggest internal security reform in more than a decade will also allow Putin to keep in check individuals and networks that have grown in influence in recent years. The focus here is less on the interior ministry, as the institution most strongly affected by the founding of the National Guard, even though it loses about one-third of its personnel including its paramilitary "muscles", and is reduced de facto to responsibility for the traffic police and criminal investigations. Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev was never one of the big players; the powerful figures are Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu, FSB head Alexander Bortnikov and Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic. Shoygu is popular, with his own following and military power resources – a unique combination in the Putin system. The FSB was a beneficiary of the last security reform in 2003, and has been able to significantly expand its powers

since then. As far as the Chechen leader is concerned, his loyal security forces (“Kadyrovtsy”) now come under the formal control of the National Guard; for Putin this is a guarantee against Kadyrov becoming too independent.

### **Refocusing on Internal Policy**

Even if Russia’s official security discourse is still dominated by postulated external threats – above all concerning NATO’s activities in Eastern Europe – the founding of the National Guard shows that Putin has come to locate the real dangers elsewhere: in Islamist terrorism, and above all in the convergence of socio-economic problems. Here the security reform strengthens two long-standing trends. Firstly, the political leadership is expanding its means of repression against opposition and civil society. If hitherto isolated and local (social) protests were to come to a head, the National Guard can be expected to clamp down quickly and energetically.

Secondly, Putin is attempting to consolidate his personal power vertical within the political leadership. His “divide and rule” model requires permanent readjustment, otherwise there is a risk of conflicts between the elite groups spiralling out of control. The founding of the National Guard both strengthens the *siloviki* and exacerbates rivalries among them. Since spring 2016 the FSB in particular has been openly flexing its muscles towards the Investigative Committee, the Federal Protective Service (FSO) and the Interior Ministry. The Russian media already speak of a “war of the services”.

For Germany and Europe, this means keeping the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy under closer observation – even if external actors possess few possibilities to influence internal developments.

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