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[Who are the Russian Cossacks of Modern Times?](#)



Russian Cossacks of modern times are an economic phenomenon. Those who want to pass off as Cossacks are predominantly motivated by earnings and are not the least bit interested in their identity. Their focus is on benefits, tax breaks and subsidies. Sheepskin hats and stripy trousers are significant only as long as they generate income. As soon as those hats become mere hats, the number of those wishing to wear them decreases dramatically.

According to the Federal Law dated December 5, 2005, No. 154-FZ "On State Service of Russian Cossacks", those calling themselves Cossacks and whose names appear in the register have the right to perform public services. The list of such services includes maintenance of order, fire-fighting, rescue operations, providing assistance to military enlistment services, and patriotic education of youths of pre-conscription age.

It is relatively easy to become a Cossack. It is sufficient to submit a handwritten application, be Orthodox, "share the ideas of the Cossacks," and obtain recommendations from two members of the organization. There are no restrictions regarding age or state of health.

The enlistment ceremony includes the following rituals: the text of the "oath of the Cossack" is read out to the ranks of applicants, each signs next to his surname, the crucifix, Gospels, and flag are kissed. In his "oath", the future Cossack promises to "faithfully serve the Fatherland, the Orthodox Church, the honest Cossacks and to faithfully uphold the Cossack traditions and customs", "before the Holy Cross and the Holy Gospel." At the end of the ceremony, the ataman congratulates each new Cossack, the priest sprinkles him with consecrated water and the Cossacks march solemnly in front of the ataman.

Members of Cossack organizations have no specialized skill set and, subsequently, do not have permanent jobs. They actively seek employment and try to offer their services to anyone and everyone. Cossacks are hired with reluctance and only in cases where a government agency is suddenly in need of unskilled workers. For obvious reasons, this happens infrequently.

On their websites, Cossack organizations regularly publish reports about the way Cossacks provide assistance to military enlistment offices while urging the youth not to shy away from conscription; the way they assist police in maintaining order during major religious holidays; the way they steward folk music concerts; and the way they act as vigilantes.

Cossacks have no rights to use force or bear arms. Thus, they cannot offer security services. In order to obtain the right to use force, Cossacks have to undergo special training and obtain certification, just as other citizens of Russia must.

To establish a Cossack private security company, a double set of documents is required. First, the Cossack society has to be registered in the Ministry of Justice - which can be quite a troublesome process - and then a private security company has to be registered in the Ministry of the Interior.

Since Cossack communities offer no permanent employment, only those unfit for service in Russian law enforcement agencies or private security companies, for one reason or another, become Cossacks.

A young military expert, having recently served in the army, possessing a good physique, and a college diploma with a sports major, can apply for a job, for example, in OMON, a system of special police units of Federal Police within the Russian, and previously Soviet, Ministry of Internal Affairs. Remuneration and social security benefits received by those who join this special task force unit are significantly higher than the national average. To join the Cossacks with no prospects of employment, money or career advancement when one stands a good chance of embarking on a career in a regular law enforcement agency is not the most rational decision, to say the least.

Russia has a huge army and also a huge market for security services. According to various estimates, almost one million are employed by law enforcement agencies and the special services. About the same number are employed in the army, and another million are employed by private security companies. Given the recent changes in foreign and domestic policy, there will be no redundancies among the *siloviki*. On the contrary, their staffing levels are set to climb and their wages set to grow.

New neighborhoods in Moscow suburbs are being populated by the military and their families, as is regularly reported by the national media. Taking into account the slow pace at which the Russian government provides housing to military personnel, this speaks volumes of the fundamental changes underway - skilled military personnel are in demand again.

At the same time, people who call themselves Cossacks and defiantly claim military status, are not in demand. This serves to underline their low professional profile.

It cannot be said that the Cossacks are not trying to join law enforcement agencies or secure posts within the security services. It is not the most profitable occupation to protect kiosks selling monastery pies and relay Russian propaganda to schoolchildren. Despite their concerted efforts, they always lose out to more experienced companies.

A recent example - in November 2015, a contract was signed between the Office of Judicial Department in Moscow and a private security organization, "Cossack Guards", established by the Cossack military society "Central Cossack Army". In accordance with the contract, Cossacks were supposed to guard ten district courts in Moscow for a period of two months. The contract was worth 3.3 million rubles. In January, the Cossacks took all of the 35 district courts of the capital under their protection. In late January 2016, lawyers of Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation appealed to the Moscow prosecutor's office to check the legality of the contract concluded with the Cossacks.

The Federal Antimonopoly Service deemed the contract illegal. The "Cossack Guards" were replaced by the Federal State Unitary Enterprise "Protection" supervised by the Ministry of the Interior of the Russian Federation. "Protection" was established in 2005 based on paramilitary and sentry units of independent security service supervised by law enforcement agencies of the Russian Federation.

Another example: there was much ado in the Russian press about the establishment of military units staffed entirely by Cossacks. Apparently, the 22nd brigade of internal troops located in the town of Kalach-on-Don was supposed to be wholly Cossack.

On Cossack websites, one can find indications of individual military units which cooperate with the Don army. The essence of the said cooperation is that young people who regard themselves as Cossacks undergo compulsory military service in this particular unit and not in a unit selected at random, as usually happens. In late April of this year, the ataman of the Kuban Cossack Army, Nikolay Doluda, pointed to the desire of Cossacks to join the National Guard. To date, the appeal remains unanswered.

Much has been said about the financing of the Cossack movement recently. The figure often cited is 1 billion rubles per annum. The figures concerning the total costs of services provided by the *siloviki* in Russia serve as quite an eye-opener. According to the [RBC Group](#), based on data provided by the Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), in 2011, the total expenditure amounted to 335 billion rubles and it grew to a total of 587 billion rubles in 2013. The amount of money allocated from the federal budget to support the Cossack movement seems ridiculous in light of this.

Apparently, Cossacks lack sufficient support and lobbying power to ensure that they are given at least one

military unit. Besides, they are not able to retain the contracts they so rarely manage to secure by some miracle.

When we speak of Cossacks, we are talking about unemployed military experts who have lost their professional skills for various reasons. Unable to obtain employment, they accept the lowest-paid jobs. Their continuous involvement in highly publicized scandals and assaults fraught with criminal indictments is good evidence of this.

Let us cite an example of the ill-fated Baltic Separate Cossack District: On August 15, 2015, a group of unidentified individuals gatecrashed the Franz Kafka and George Orwell Intellectual Forum in Kaliningrad. Forum participants identified the assailants as Cossacks from the “Baltic Separate Cossack District - the Baltic Cossack Union of the Kaliningrad Oblast”.

According to the [RuGrad.EU](#) Kaliningrad business portal, this union is closely related to the authorities and the authorities of the Kaliningrad Oblast in particular. The latter allocates grants to the union from time to time.

In 2015, the “Baltic Separate Cossack District - the Baltic Cossack Union of the Kaliningrad Oblast” lead by ataman Maxim Buga (Buga is a member of two councils which advise the Governor of the Kaliningrad Oblast Nikolay Tsukanov and he is a prominent member of the All-Russia People’s Front (ONF)) received a budgetary grant of 139 thousand rubles to organize a workshop, “The Cossacks and notaries. Combating corruption: historical experience and modern times.” The same sum of money was earmarked by the authorities of the Kaliningrad Oblast to the “Saint Nicholas Society” which also belongs to the “Baltic Separate Cossack District”. This time, the grant was allocated for the organization of a regional heroic-and-patriotic festival of Cossack societies the “Baltic Sich”. The ataman of this society is a former deputy of the Oblast Duma and an owner of the transport company “KenigAuto” Mikhail Dudarev.

Georgy Dykhanov, the Commissioner for the Protection of Entrepreneurs’ Rights in the Kaliningrad Oblast, participated in the allocation of grants. According to the unified state register of legal entities, Dykhanov is related to the “SPAS” Cossack settlement which also received 139 thousand rubles from the Oblast authorities to develop its original program of heroic-and-patriotic Cossack education entitled “Our Fathers’ Road of Fame”.

The trespass of the Franz Kafka and George Orwell Intellectual Forum as well as the assault on Aleksey Navalny in the town of Anapa is not something a successful military or police officer or security guard would be likely to carry out. This is a dirty and dangerous job, fit for the unemployed *siloviki* who have nothing to lose which is what makes them so dangerous.

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