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[The ominous rise of Russian National Guard](#)



Russia's National Guard (Ros Gvardia) - has been in existence for just over a year. It is already well known for regularly buying [new weapons](#) and for its brutal tactics when dispersing civil demonstrations. National Guard comprises between 350-400 thousand people, which exceeds the number of Russian land forces (which amount [to at most 290 thousand](#)). At the same time, the power of the president's 'personal army' can be used not just within the country but also abroad. In this context, a question arises: can Vladimir Putin rely on these forces to keep him in power?

A new pillar of power

The creation of National Guard in the spring of 2016 was perceived by some experts as an attempt by Vladimir Putin to weaken the position of the existing special services in Russia's hierarchy. The creation of a new 'power agency', headed by Viktor Zolotov, who had been the chief of the Putin's security guards for a long time, seemed to verify this explanation. However, let us not forget that Zolotov had commanded internal troops since May 2014 under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (and had been the deputy commander since September 2013). His formal position did not interfere with his informal status as Putin's trusted accomplice.

According to another [interpretation](#), the creation of the national guard enabled the withdrawal of the most

combat-capable Chechen units of the internal troops out of Ramzan Kadyrov's control. Allegedly, the cumbersome management structure of the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not allow the Kremlin to fully control them. However, this version does not add up: today, the national guard units in Chechnya are headed by Sharip Delimkhanov, the younger brother of Adam Delimkhanov, Kadyrov's right hand. In fact, the Chechen dictator still has his own army.

The internal troops were originally created by the Bolsheviks in 1918-1919 to retain and strengthen their power in territories under their control. Later on, the main goal of their existence remained unchanged: to ensure the suppression of any mass civil resistance. Interestingly, after the collapse of the USSR, the new Russian government did not dissolve the internal troops. They continued to be equipped with heavy firearms, armoured vehicles, artillery and aircraft, and carried out a wide range of tasks, ranging from dispersals of demonstrations to wars in Chechnya. Therefore, their separation as an independent special service in 2016 must have been caused by more complex considerations than the competition among the rank and file of the Kremlin's *siloviki*.

First of all, already by 2013 the Kremlin started to believe in an illusion of 'colour revolutions' organised from the outside. However, this irrational fear has a partial basis in reality. Russia's development was no longer possible without a change in its power structures. However, any change of power would inevitably lead to a situation where a significant part of the Russian ruling class would lose its immense wealth and privileges, and some might also lose their freedom.

At the same time, the existing forces were unsuitable for combating this threat. The Federal Security Service was busy protecting specific people. The FSB had enormous powers, but its effectiveness and ability to defend the regime were greatly exaggerated (and everyone remembers that the KGB could not save the USSR). In their activities, the police interacted too closely with citizens and in the event of a serious cataclysm they could not and, would not, protect those authorities. Reliance on the army is not part of the Russian tradition at all: the Kremlin is organically afraid of political strengthening of the military as much as of a revolution.

Secondly, it became clear to the Kremlin that peaceful protests were not the only threat to its control. In 2008, a small well-organised armed group of people paralysed Mumbai for several days. In 2010, 'coastal guerrillas' declared war against the police and, with full sympathy for the local residents, paralysed the local government in a large area north of Vladivostok for a few weeks. The war against Ukraine, which started in 2014, showed that mercenaries, of course, were an attractive resource, but too many Russians were ready to grab weapons. For those who returned safely, there was already no big difference between Ukraine's Donetsk and any [Russian city](#): for many of them, armed violence became an acceptable way of solving problems.

That is why Moscow did everything to ensure that some of the mercenaries returning from Ukraine [went further afield](#) to die for Bashar Assad. Thousands of other Russians left to fight in the ranks of ISIS. Yet the problem of the Russian government is that new people will inevitably come to replace those who are dead. The lack of reasonable prospects and the existing injustice drive the radicalisation of society, and the threat is no longer confined to the problematic regions of North Caucasus.

With that in mind, the Kremlin needed a special service which would protect it on an ad hoc basis in any situation while it is looking for opportunities for long-term survival. A way out was to delegate a person who was close to Putin to the troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Not being connected with them by 'corporate' ties, he began to turn the troops into detached Putin's guards.

The Praetorian approach

The National Guard significantly expanded in comparison with internal troops: in addition to 170,000-200,000 strong internal troops, it also [incorporated](#) detachments of special police forces (OMON and SOBR) numbering 25-30 thousand people, the former security units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the state enterprise 'Okhrana' (170 thousand people).

Previously, the internal troops trained mainly in their own ranges, yet with the arrival of Viktor Zolotov they began to conduct [exercises](#) in various Russian cities, training to protect the buildings of regional and city administrations, military factories, etc.

Importantly, security activities provide not only a large inflow of funds, which in itself is important in the Russian hierarchy of power, but they also change the relations between the guards and the guarded. The bottom line is that with the creation of National Guard in Russia, the protection of government bodies finally became the most important part of the political agenda. At the regional level, this means that guards can both protect local elites from citizens, and isolate these elites from the society at any time. The latter is possible if the governors who have been actually appointed by the Kremlin suddenly decide to be loyal to local residents, whose interests they technically represent, in the context of an aggravating social and economic crisis.

The National Guard also gained control over the licensing of civilian weapons (for hunting, self-defense and for security firms). Previously, this was done by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but now such a thing cannot be entrusted to ordinary policemen. In the Kremlin's eyes, any hunter is a potential 'guerilla'.

The task to disperse demonstrations has also been preserved, but there is one interesting detail here. Previously, internal troops could directly participate in such activities, as, for example, on 6 May 2012 on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. But already in 2017, during the protest rallies in Russia, the military formations of the Guard only served to cordon off areas, whereas the police and OMON were engaged in dispersal. The reason is clear: troops that use force against unarmed citizens decompose psychologically very quickly and lose the ability to perform military tasks. It is precisely this disintegration that the Kremlin will try to avoid for as long as it can in the current situation. The troops of the National Guard are given the role of 'the ultimate argument' in preserving the existing regime. The dirty work at opposition rallies will be carried out by OMON, which represents 5% of the Ministry's employees.

Apart from other things, the National Guard in Russia is already expanding its activities into cyberspace, [trying to obtain the right](#) to conduct investigations in cases of citizens suspected of committing crimes. However, other special forces have resisted this idea so far.

Rosgvardia also [declares its readiness](#) to participate in military operations abroad, primarily in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). That means that Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan fall into the zone of possible activities. One should also bear in mind that Russia also participates in conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, where guardsmen can potentially find a way to be useful. Interestingly, [battalions](#) of the Russian military police, formed from Chechens, are officially present in Syria. However, to all appearances, these are just Kadyrov's soldiers, who are actually serving (or have served) in the National Guard. There simply cannot be so many Chechens in the Russian military police (several thousand people all over the country).

Thus, the Federal Service of the National Guard Troops is an iceberg, and the fight against opposition protests is only the tip. In fact, it is obvious that the Kremlin is preparing for heightened domestic political turbulence. The new special force is expected to protect the political regime from any changes that are not controlled from Moscow. Russian citizens are perceived here as a hostile environment, as was the case in the early years of Bolshevik rule.

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