



Putin Consolidates Domestic Power

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Largely unnoticed by the West, Vladimir Putin has just launched a radical overhaul of power in Russia. On April 5th, the Russian President formally announced the creation of a new National Guard intended to serve as an umbrella organization and coordinating body for the country's numerous "force ministries."

The scope of the envisioned overhaul is enormous. As political scientist Nikolai Petrov notes in *The Moscow Times*, "practically every branch of the siloviki [force structures]" that cumulatively serve as the guarantors of the contemporary Russian state will be affected by the change.

Specifically, "[t]he Interior Ministry will lose most of its muscle: 170,000 interior troops, 50,000 special forces and riot police, private security forces as well as control over private security forces and arms trafficking will all go to the National Guard. In exchange, the Interior Ministry will receive 30,000 Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN) personnel - without generals - and approximately the same number of staff from the Federal Migration Service (FMS). Both services have essentially been disbanded and their directors marginalized."

According to Kremlin officials, such steps are intended to help the state better combat terrorism and criminality in the country. Perhaps they are, given the country's deteriorating internal security situation. But Putin's creation of a new praetorian guard is also a political power play - one likely driven by two distinct considerations.

First, the Kremlin is seeking to expand its power in the face of rising domestic discontent. In the past two years the country's economy has suffered a dramatic decline with the collapse of global energy prices. This has been compounded by the punishing sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The resulting economic dislocation is massive; today the ruble is in a free fall and poverty in Russia is at its highest point in a decade.

Unsurprisingly, as the country's economic fortunes have declined, popular discontent has risen. Recent months have seen growing pessimism among ordinary Russians, coupled with mounting unrest across the country's socio-economic strata, from long-haul truckers to rural laborers.

Predictably, the Kremlin has responded with measures that constrict the country's political space - including the effective nationalization of the nation's repository of historical memory, the Federal Archives Agency, and the creation of onerous new rules governing freedom of assembly. The creation of a National Guard appears to be yet another step in this direction - and a particularly timely one, given the growing prospects for social unrest.

In the meantime, Putin has probably bought himself some political breathing room from the increasingly restive power centers and elites with whom the Russian president has long had a successful political compact. With this latest maneuver, Putin has effectively downgraded the power of potential competitors and critics, many of whom hail from the country's powerful intelligence and security services. At the same time, he has elevated others whose loyalty is unswerving - most notably Viktor Zolotov, a former bodyguard who has been named head of the new National Guard.

If Putin succeeds with his plan, he will have codified an even stronger grip on the levers of political and policing power through an increasingly monolithic, authoritarian security structure more beholden than ever to the Russian president personally.

That makes the name of Putin's new federal agency something of a misnomer. Its concern, after all, won't be with protecting the Russian nation as a whole but rather with safeguarding and expanding the power of just one citizen in it.

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