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Russia: the National Guard – the internal troops join the game

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On 5 April, President Vladimir Putin carried out a restructuring of the internal security system for the first time since 2003. The changes were introduced on the basis of presidential decrees with immediate effect and will essentially change the balance of power and the competences of the ministries in charge of the country's internal security. The Federal Service for the National Guard Troops (FSGN) reporting to the president was established using the organisational potential of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Viktor Zolotov has been put in charge of the new agency. Before this, Zolotov served as commander of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and earlier he had for many years been the head of the Presidential Security Service. At the same time, the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN) and the Federal Migration Service (FMS) were liquidated, and their structures have become specialised departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The president's decisions are a manifestation of the ongoing militarisation of the state, as well as proof that Putin places his trusted people within his inner circle. This means that ensuring the stability of the political system in the face of what is viewed as threats by the governing group (the economic crisis and 'Western sabotage) will remain a top priority in domestic policy. These decisions should also be viewed as a warning from the government that it has decided to use force against the public should signs of internal destabilisation appear.

The president's internal army

President Putin's decisions have essentially changed the balance of power inside the Russian law enforcement elite and are a result of the long-lasting rivalry between the heads of individual services for the scope of competences and their control of social and economic life. Signs of Viktor Zolotov's growing significance and of the increasing independence of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have been coming to the attention of the media since 2013. At the same time, plans to make the FSKN and the FMS part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were revealed. Government representatives did not conceal that fulfilment of these plans was the subject of negotiations between the ministries, and that the final decision would depend on the president's standpoint. At the same time, the media was becoming increasingly critical of the operational effectiveness of the FSKN and the FMS, while a positive image of Viktor Zolotov as a competent military

commander was being bolstered. In effect, after two years of dispute, President Putin decided that the Internal Troops would gain independence, and this in Russian terms will mean the creation of an internal army consisting of around 400,000 soldiers that will report to the president. This also means that the president has deemed the previous model of the functioning of the internal troops as being insufficiently effective. The scenarios of the exercises the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have been engaged in over the past two years prove that the approach to the way the newly created National Guard will be used has changed. The scenarios envisaged their support in combating operations conducted by the armed forces, including participation in urban warfare and suppressing public protests.

The potential of the newly created FSGN and the fact that it has been entrusted with tasks directly linked to maintaining law and order will significantly undermine the position of the Minister of Internal Affairs, since he has been deprived, for example, of control of special police troops. The consequences of the changes will include complicating the FSGN's contacts with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Security Service, who until recently shared competences in combating terrorism and political extremism (defined by the Russian government as combating opponents of the political system).

It is worth noting that the FSGN will also be tasked with supervising private security agencies which employ around one million people. This supervision – by means of a licensing mechanism, brings considerable, including informal, financial benefits to individuals in charge of granting licences for running the agencies and for carrying guns.

Besides the addition of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs the FSGN is composed of all the special units that until recently reported to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Its creation means that a strong militarised formation of internal troops that reports solely to the president and which can conduct operations in Russia by itself (without coordinating its actions with other services) has been established.

The fact that the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN) and the Federal Migration Service (it has been announced that the staff of the latter will be reduced by 30 per cent) have been included in the Ministry of Internal Affairs to form elite law enforcement groups will not compensate the Minister of Internal Affairs for the competences he has had to relinquish to the head of the FSGN. The entities which until recently had exclusive prerogatives are now becoming some of the many sections of the ministry. The liquidation of the FSKN means that the Minister of Internal Affairs becomes a partner in the international drug combating co-operation. As a consequence of the liquidation of the FSM (a service which was bureaucratised to a great extent), the migration department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is likely to be vested with operational and investigative prerogatives; the level of repressiveness is also likely to increase.

These decisions are also linked to the present economic crisis in Russia, which is forcing the government to make budget cuts, also affecting the law enforcement agencies. One proof of this includes the announcement that the staff of what used to be the FMS will be reduced by 30 per cent. Such moves have also been used for the purpose of propaganda addressed to the Russian public (suggesting that red tape is being reduced).

Viktor Zolotov – the new old face of the Kremlin elite

The fact that Viktor Zolotov has been formally included in the narrow circle of decision-makers is not a surprise. Zolotov has been directly linked to Vladimir Putin since the 1990s, for example, as his personal bodyguard, and their contacts at that time were characterised by a great degree of mutual trust. The Russian media speculated then that Zolotov was Putin's intermediary in contacts with the Tambov mafia boss, Vladimir Barsukov-Kumarin, who controlled money laundering. In 2000–2013, Zolotov served as the head of the Presidential Security Service. This service, which is formally part of the Federal Protective Service, is in fact an independent agency, a kind of presidential bodyguard service. It is responsible not only for the physical security of the head of state and his family, but is also tasked with the president's logistic and financial service in the broader meaning of the term. In 2013, the president nominated him the first deputy minister of internal affairs and the commander of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When Zolotov assumed this post, he focused on modernising the combat potential of the internal troops, acting completely independently and without consulting this with the head of the ministry.

By appointing Zolotov head of an independent ministry of federal significance the president has finally confirmed his strong position within the small circle of the Kremlin elite. The nomination of Zolotov as a permanent member of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, a group of fourteen senior state officials who have an influence on the president's decisions of strategic significance, is the formal proof of this.

Zolotov's career proves that the Kremlin elite's approach to state security has remained unchanged. It is identified with maintaining the inviolability of the present political system and protecting the interests of the small group of people who rule the country in the face of what they see as threats (the economic crisis and 'Western sabotage). The changes in the so-called 'law enforcement block' were made ahead of the parliamentary election scheduled for September this year and under conditions of an aggressive foreign policy adopted by Russia. One of its elements has been the use of military force beyond its borders (the Ukrainian side has pointed out that the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation were used during the fights in Donbas). The changes also prove that the Kremlin's stance remains unaltered, ruling out any political concessions at home, and that the government is ready to use force against the Russian public.