

Russia creates National Guard to protect capitalist oligarchy

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Last month, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the creation of a National Guard. The aim of the force, which will report directly to the president, is to defend the capitalist oligarchy over which the Kremlin presides against growing external and internal threats.

Along with the danger of Islamic terrorist activity on Russian territory, the country's ruling elite confronts ongoing conflicts along the perimeters of the nation's borders, and the possibility of ethnic-regional separatism stoked by the imperialist powers in the multi-ethnic state. At the same time, discontent is rising in Russia over collapsing living standards.

The newly proposed armed force has no precedent in the history of post-Soviet Russia in its composition, size or prerogatives. It will absorb all the internal troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (about 170,000 men), and all the special detachments of this Ministry, namely the Special Rapid Response Unit (SOBR) and the special mobile militia units (OMON). These last two together amount to about 50,000 men.

According to press reports, in total the National Guard will consist of at least 300,000 troops. Considering that the Russian Defense Ministry has about 1 million troops, the new force will effectively function as a separate, Praetorian Guard of the president. A little known Putin loyalist, the former head of presidential security, Viktor Zolotov, will head the new agency. Prior to this appointment, he directed the troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD).

The National Guard will inherit all the equipment belonging to the MVD. This includes about 1,600 troop carriers, 35 artillery pieces, armored cars, Il-76 and An-72 transport planes, the Mi-8 and Mi-24 attack helicopters and a few tanks.

The first reading of the new law establishing the

National Guard by the Russian Parliament (Duma) is planned for May 18. It is expected to win the approval of all parliamentary factions, including the Communist Party (CPRF) of Gennady Zyuganov, which competes with other parties of the "loyal opposition" in the promotion of repressive and antidemocratic legislation.

On April 14, Putin sought to justify the creation of the new force by claiming that its main purpose is to "control the distribution of weapons inside the country." The real aim of the National Guard, however, finds expression in the mandates and rights it has been granted.

The National Guard will have the ability "to arrest and bring in for an identity check" individuals without providing any reason for their detention and without proving that they are wanted by the police. The draft law establishing the Guard allows unrestricted "access to dwellings and other properties, to grounds and territories." Restrictions on using various special measures of crowd control, such as water pumps and sonic cannons, are to be drastically reduced for the National Guard, as compared to existing police forces. It will have the virtually unrestricted right to employ such means against protesters during mass demonstrations, with the exception of "visibly pregnant women, obvious invalids and children."

In an April 28 comment about the establishment of the National Guard, *Gazeta.ru* noted that according to polls, "many people understand that the new armed force is aimed at suppressing possible disorders within the country... Not even political disturbances, but rather economic and social ones. More and more often mass street rallies attract not the white collars, but the "Uralvagonzavod" (the Ural railcar works, i.e. the blue collar proletariat)," remarked the online newspaper.

The growing economic crisis in Russia, which has

pushed tens of millions of citizens to the edge, is breeding diffuse but ever stronger popular discontent.

According to official statistics, in March 2016 retail sales dropped by 5.8 percent compared to the year before, real wages fell by 3 percent and real disposable income shrank by 1.8 percent. In mid-April, the Ministry of Finance announced that it will cut the “unprotected”—i.e., social spending—portion of the federal budget by 10 percent.

With the average monthly income of a Russian family in 2015 amounting to just 43,800 rubles (about \$665), households are facing severe financial distress. “Exhaustion of resources—that is how we may summarize the state of the Russian consumer today,” observed Marina Lapenkova, director for work with global clients of the Nielsen Russia Center in an interview with *Kommersant*. The Nielsen index of consumer trust has dropped to its lowest point in 11 years.

The rapid decline of incomes, the halving of the value of the ruble and the freezing of wages of many state employees and pensioners have led most of the country’s inhabitants to devote more than 50 percent of their budgets just to the purchase of food.

Plans for the creation of the new force come amidst news reports of preparations on the part of state authorities for the use of violence against the population. In April, there was an exercise in the Smolensk region on how to disperse an unsanctioned mass rally. According to the hypothetical scenario used for the exercise, local inhabitants had received exaggerated utility bills and came out to an unsanctioned demonstration.

Earlier, there were internet reports of a training exercise in Liubertsy (a suburb of Moscow), where the troops were training to disperse an unsanctioned meeting held under the slogan, “No to corruption!”

In April, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a public request for proposals to design a non-lethal acoustic means to disperse large rallies. As public commentary noted at the time, similar measures were utilized by the American police to disperse street disturbances in Ferguson, Missouri.

The decision to establish the National Guard is fully in line with Kremlin’s overall policy for decades—the strengthening of the state and its apparatus of repression, the encroachment and limitation of

democratic rights, the criminalization of that deemed to be “nonconformist” and the fostering of militarism and Russian nationalism. These tendencies have grown stronger during the past two years, as tensions between Moscow and Washington have escalated, the Kremlin threatened by US support for regime change in Russia and the regional break-up of the multi-ethnic state.

Anxiety over the situation in the country is driving renewed efforts to limit any means available to the population for the expression of political opposition. On April 18, the chairman of Russia’s Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, published a comment in a leading press outlet entitled, “It is time to put a stop to the information war”. Denouncing the “hybrid warfare unleashed by the US and its allies” during “the past decade,” he declared, “We should stop playing at fake democracy, stop following these fake liberal values.”

He demanded the tightening of censorship of the internet, the “bypassing of the courts”, the compilation of blacklists of extremist materials and the blocking of web sites that “spread extremist and radical-nationalist information.” Dispensing with the concept of the presumption of innocence, he wrote, “if those possessing such information do not consider it extremist, then let them argue about it through the courts and prove their innocence.”

Bastrykin also suggested using the criminal code to “decisively interrupt the targeted falsification of the nation’s history”. He declared statements that the government deems to be “connected to falsification of facts about historical issues and events” to be the equivalent of extremism.

While maintaining that the main target of such measures is the propaganda of the imperialist powers, the Kremlin is fundamentally concerned with blocking the emergence of a movement of working people against both Russia’s capitalist oligarchy and the rapacious appetites of global finance.



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