

SECURITY INSIGHTS



The Law Enforcement Agencies: Russian Domestic Security and International Implications

By Mark Galeotti

Executive Summary

- Russia's law enforcement agencies operate within a system that puts primacy on the interests of the state rather than the execution of the laws. Although there are many personnel in the various agencies who may regret this, and might even support change, there is currently no sign of any serious internal resistance to the status quo.
- A central tenet of Russian policy is that domestic unrest is fomented, or at the very least supported, by hostile foreign powers—especially the United States. As a result, the connections between Russia's domestic law enforcement and external security are especially strong.
- A dominant generation of *securocrats*—whose ideological belief is that Russia is under attack, which predisposes them to securitizing everything from street protest to investigative reporting—are beginning to be challenged by a rising cohort of technocrats. Ambitious and morally flexible, these technocrats are not interested in challenging existing policy, but their essentially nonideological nature means that they could more easily adapt to a less authoritarian and isolationist policy in the future

In Russia, the foreign and domestic dimensions of security are viewed essentially as two sides of the same coin. This is especially the case in the age of so-called *gibridnaya voina*, in the Kremlin apparently believes that it faces a real, serious, and sustained Western attempt to undermine Russia's geopolitical status and autonomy, as well as the stability of the regime and the distinctive national culture it espouses.¹ There are many within Russia's law enforcement agencies who are dedicated professionals, genuinely committed to their formal mission, but the institutions as a whole operate within a system that prioritizes the security and interests of the

¹ See, for example, Aleksandr Bartosh, *Konflikty XXI veka: gibridnaya voina i tsvetnaya revolyutsiya*, Goryachaya liniya – Telekom, 2018; Igor Panarin, *Gibridnaya voina protiv Rossii, 1816–2016 gg*, Goryachaya Liniya – Telekom, 2017; Valeryi Gerasimov, "Sovremennye voiny i aktualnye voprosy oborony strany," *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 2, No. 59, 2017.

state and the regime rather than the letter and spirit of the laws. Although there are many in the various agencies who may regret this, and might even support change, there is currently no sign of any serious or sustained internal resistance to the status quo, and this supports the wider Kremlin perspective on national security.

This commitment to regime security is, of course, a particular priority for domestic security agencies, such as the Federal Security Service (FSB: *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti*), which also has begun to acquire a foreign intelligence and active measures role. However, even such law enforcement agencies as the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD: *Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del*), the General Prosecutor's Office (GPRF: *General'naya prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), the Investigative Committee (SKRF: *Sledstvennyi komitet Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), and the National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*, or the FSVNG: *Federal'naya sluzhba voisk National'noi gvardii*) have a role in defining and asserting national security policies and expressing and shaping the regime's operational code.

The MVD is the primary law enforcement agency in Russia, operating through regional Internal Affairs Directorates and republican ministries that have considerable autonomy in theory but that nonetheless are really simply local branches, as in Soviet times (with the de facto exception of the directorates and ministries in Chechnya). In addition to the police and a range of regulatory and administrative agencies (e.g., road safety and migration control), the MVD used to have a paramilitary public order force, but in 2016, these Interior Troops formed the basis of the *Rosgvardiya*, which also includes the Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON: *Otryad mobil'niy osobogo naznacheniya*) riot police and the Special Quick Response Unit (SOBR: *Spetsial'niy otryad bystrovo reagirovaniya*) SWAT teams. Unlike the police, the National Guard's primary function is to maintain public order and regime security.²

Likewise, the SKRF used to be part of the GPRF, responsible for investigating serious crimes and inspecting government agencies, until it was made a stand-alone agency in 2011 in what has generally been regarded as a power grab by its leader, Alexander Bastrykin.³ The GPRF still manages prosecutions and some preliminary investigations, making the Prosecutor General very broadly comparable to the U.S. Attorney General.

Since the creation of the National Guard in 2016, there has been considerable stability in Russia's law enforcement agencies, despite the evident empire-building ambition of the National Guard's commander, General Viktor Zolotov. However, in January 2020, as part of the constitutional reshuffle announced by President Vladimir Putin and the replacement of long-serving Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev with Mikhail Mishustin, a series of changes may suggest new developments in this sector, too.

Security from the Outside In

Russia's domestic security structure is relevant beyond the country's borders. In particular, domestic laws and law enforcement agencies help signal wider international policy. For example, Putin's proposal in his 2020 amendments that the Russian constitution should explicitly take

² Mark Galeotti, "National Guard: The Watchdog That Could Break the Leash," *Raam op Rusland*, August 14, 2017, <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/defensie/677-national-guard-the-watchdog-that-could-break-the-leash>.

³ Sergei Smirnov, "Rossiya stal'naya: istoriya Sledstvennogo komiteta," *Meduza*, July 15, 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/07/26/rossiya-stalnaya-kratkaya-istoriya-sledstvennogo-komiteta>.

precedence over international laws and institutions marks an intensification of a campaign to privilege Russia's sovereignty over the global order.⁴ Whether this is legally possible remains to be seen, but it does mean that—in theory—Moscow could invalidate any treaty former President Boris Yeltsin signed with other post-Soviet states, and international courts of arbitration cannot provide even limited protection for foreign investors. On one level, this is largely symbolic because the Kremlin has often found ways of bypassing or ignoring such constraints. However, politics is about symbolism and intent, so the significance is not trivial. More broadly, the status, funding, and stance of the domestic security apparatus demonstrates the Kremlin's threat perceptions. In recent years, for example, the MVD has lost funding to the National Guard (over and above the budgetary hit it took when the latter also took over FGUP Okhrana, the state's private security corporation⁵). This appears to reflect a growing concern on the regime's part about the risk of what it believes to be foreign-instigated or foreign-supported protest.

This was best articulated by General Yurii Baluevskii, former Chief of the General Staff and now an adviser to National Guard head Zolotov. In May 2017, Baluevskii addressed the perceived threat to Russia from foreign political-military interference and intervention: "The goal of 21st-century wars will not be the capture of territories, but rather the subjugation of the political machinery and the formation of a system of external control over people living in these territories," and "any color revolution is a stage-managed action intended to affect a coup d'état."⁶ The response, he suggested, should involve both the National Guard and the regular military. The National Guard has a specific mission over and above simply supporting the regular military in territorial defense, and it has wargamed operations against insurgents backed by foreign special forces. In the 2017 Zapad exercise, for example, they were deployed during the early stage, when the scenario posited incursions by enemy special forces in support of local "terrorists," as well as general rear-area support later.⁷

Furthermore, although the National Guard has not been deployed in such missions openly (although some of the "Chechen Military Police" seen in Syria since 2017 may well have been National Guards⁸), it has been acknowledged that the force could operate abroad in peacekeeping and stability operations.⁹ Thus, the National Guard can also be considered—to a limited extent and for certain specific missions—as part of the country's foreign intervention assets.

⁴ Denis Dmitriev, "Putin Wants to Give Russian Law Priority over International Law Without an Entirely New Constitution. Technically, That's Not Legally Possible," *Meduza*, January 15, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/01/15/putin-wants-to-give-russian-law-priority-over-international-law-without-an-entirely-new-constitution-technically-that-s-not-legally-possible>.

⁵ Fabrice Deprez, "Russia's National Guard Sets Its Sights on the Country's Private Security Business," *BMB Russia*, January 31, 2019, <https://bearmarketbrief.com/2019/01/31/russias-national-guard-sets-its-sights-on-the-countrys-private-security-business/>.

⁶ Yurii Baluevskii, "Voina ne konchaetsya, ona — zamiraet," *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, May 26, 2017.

⁷ Mathieu Boulègue, "Five Things to Know About the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise," *Chatham House Expert Comment*, September 25, 2017, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/five-things-know-about-zapad-2017-military-exercise?CMP=share_btn_em.

⁸ Mark Galeotti, "Not-So-Soft Power: Russia's Military Police in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/not-so-soft-power-russias-military-police-in-syria>.

⁹ "Russia's National Guard Could Take Part in Peacekeeping Operations Abroad," *Sputnik*, November 4, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201604111037837030-russian-national-guard-peacekeepers>; "National Guard to Complete Assigned Missions Both in Russia and Abroad," *TASS*, June 27, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/953554>.

Technocrats Versus Securocrats

There is also a significant distinction between senior figures who could best be described as technocrats and securocrats. While the former will likely be interested in personal and institutional advancement (as with all Russian officials), they are essentially motivated by their formal role, to do their job, and do it well. Conversely, the securocrats are less concerned with legality in its own right and more with the security aspect of their mission; in the words of one former Presidential Administration insider, securocrats “see everything, from politics to economics, as warfighting.”¹⁰

Interior Minister General (Police) Vladimir Kolokoltsev, a career police officer since 1982, is very much in the technocrat mold. Although he sometimes makes ritual statements critiquing the West and linking foreign interference with domestic opposition, Kolokoltsev’s real focus is on policing, and he has expressed a clear appreciation that this depends on a positive relationship with society. His appointment in 2012, replacing Committee for State Security (KGB: *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*) and FSB veteran Rashid Nurgaliev, was greeted with relief and approval among the police force. Although his relatively apolitical stance has arguably weakened his political status—best demonstrated by the loss of officers and budgets to the new National Guard—he remains opposed to the use of the police as regime storm troopers outside the parameters of the law.¹¹ For example, when the police were used to violently suppress opposition protests in Moscow in summer 2019, it was not Kolokoltsev’s decision, but orders he was given from above. The incident led to considerable dissatisfaction within the police force.¹² Likely as a move intended to help mitigate that dissatisfaction, it was announced in January 2020 that police in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and their respective regions would receive substantial salary bonuses.¹³

Interestingly, the cabinet reshuffle of January 2020 led to the appointment of another technocrat to a senior law enforcement position: General (Justice) Igor Krasnov as the new Prosecutor General. He is something of a legend in law enforcement circles, with a reputation for being an investigator who follows a case wherever it leads, regardless of the political contexts.¹⁴ (Indeed, this helps explain why he was transferred from the politically charged investigation of opposition figure Boris Nemtsov in 2015 as soon as it began to implicate Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.¹⁵) Whereas Kolokoltsev was once decidedly isolated in the law enforcement

¹⁰ Former Presidential Administration insider, conversation with the author, Moscow, 2016.

¹¹ Alexander Bratersky, “Newsmaker: Kolokoltsev Seen as Voice of Reform,” *Moscow Times*, May 21, 2012, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/21/newsmaker-kolokoltsev-seen-as-voice-of-reform-a14893>.

¹² Tatiana Stanovaya, “Konkurs zashchitnikov stroya,” *Moscow Carnegie Center*, August 7, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79636>.

¹³ “Nadbavka ‘za slozhnost’”: Politseiskie i rosgvardeitsy Moskvy i Peterburga poluchili bonus it pravitel’sstva,” *Tsargrad-TV*, January 24, 2020, https://tsargrad.tv/news/nadbavka-za-slozhnost-policejskie-i-rosgvardejcy-moskvy-i-peterburga-poluchili-bonus-ot-pravitelstva_235694.

¹⁴ Maxim Solopov, “‘An Investigation Loves Silence.’ What Little We Know About Igor Krasnov, Russia’s Next Attorney General,” *Meduza*, January, 20 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/01/21/an-investigation-loves-silence>.

¹⁵ “Top Russian Detective Removed from Nemtsov Murder Case,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-nemtsov-murder-case-detective-removed/27018992.html>.

community, now the heads of the two largest—if not necessarily always most powerful—agencies in the sector can be considered professional rather than political in their primary orientation.

At the other extreme is General Zolotov, director of the National Guard. A former head of Putin’s personal protection detail and a career KGB and then Federal Protection Service officer, Zolotov has an unsavory reputation as a man who prioritizes security over legality. Reportedly, he once even mused about which opposition figures to kill, and he infamously (and ludicrously) challenged anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny to a duel.¹⁶

Perhaps closer to Zolotov for reasons of political interest rather than temperament is SKRF director Bastrykin. When he managed to persuade then-President Dmitry Medvedev to establish the Investigative Committee as a separate agency under him, he burned many political bridges, including with former Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika.¹⁷ A man with no particular power base or patrons, Bastrykin—like Zolotov—depends on Putin’s personal support for his political significance and survival. They both also need to overstate the scale and nature of the domestic political threat and the extent to which this is a product of foreign *gibridaya voina* to demonstrate their adherence to the Kremlin line and also justify their extensive powers and budgets.

There is also a generational dimension in the personal politics at the top of the law-enforcement agencies. Bastrykin and Zolotov are 66 (and Chaika is 68), and they are squarely in Putin’s generation—men whose formative early career experiences were in the Soviet legal and security apparatus at a time when the Soviet Union and its empire still seemed indomitable. They are all of the same cohort as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (67), Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev (68), and FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov (68). Kolokoltsev is 58, while Krasnov is just 44, and their early careers were in the growing disorder of the 1980s and the outright anarchy of the 1990s, respectively. (Although the practical power of the Justice Ministry is limited in practical law-enforcement matters, it may also be worth noting that the new minister, Konstantin Chuychenko, is 54.)

Impacts on Russia’s Operational Code

This is why the distinctions between technocrat and securocrat and between various generations matter in this context, as personal beliefs and institutional interests play out in both the Russian security debate and the evolution of the regime’s operational code.

Putin has historically shown himself willing to split, combine, and unite security and law enforcement agencies, especially in the name of maintaining his personal control over them. As his era looks to be moving into a new phase—perhaps even an endgame—following his 2020 constitutional revisions, keeping a tight grip on the agencies, and especially the capacity to use them to discipline and control the elite, is likely to be more important than ever.

¹⁶ Elizaveta Antonova et al, “Zolotov vs Naval’nyi: pochemu direktor Rosgvardii poshol v puti Usmanova,” *RBK*, September, 11 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/09/2018/5b97e1d29a7947702872aecf>.

¹⁷ Richard Sakwa, “Investigator Bastrykin and the Search for Enemies,” *oD:R*, April 10, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/investigator-bastrykin-and-search-for-enemies>.

There have been periodic rumors about Bastrykin's fate,¹⁸ and if Krasnov proves a reliable and effective Prosecutor General, it is possible that the SKRF may be rolled back into the GPRF. After all, with the proposed constitutional amendments—including a provision allowing the president to dismiss federal judges on the recommendation of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the legislature) and in certain cases for the Federation Council, at the president's suggestion, to be able to remove Constitutional and Supreme Court judges—the separation of powers is being diluted further.

Given the essentially isolationist and arguably paranoid impulses behind both (1) the use of the SKRF against the so-called “non-systemic” largely represented by Alexei Navalny's Foundation for the Struggle Against Corruption and (2) the National Guard's mission of resisting foreign-inspired “color revolutions,” the agencies and individuals concerned have a vested interest in preserving the current notion of an embattled Russia facing an existential political challenge from the West. While the agencies will engage in bureaucratic struggles for budgets and roles with each other and with the military and security agencies, the law enforcement agencies will fundamentally uphold the same code and worldview. However, the appointment of 61-year-old Colonel General Viktor Strigunov as First Deputy Commander of the National Guard in January 2020 suggests that, although technocrats may have made gains in some areas, the securocrats are still strong.¹⁹ Strigunov was laboring under the weight of a series of scandals (including a case in which soldiers under his command were fed dog food, after which he promised to resign but never did), but he is widely regarded as Zolotov's man in both allegiance and approach.²⁰ His main rivals for the position, the younger Colonel General Sergei Chenchik and Lt. General Oleg Plokhoi, were considered favored by the FSB—and more willing to restore better relations with the MVD. In his Praetorian Guard, it seems Putin wants to retain both a singularity of focus and a maximalist commitment to order above all.

After all, the rise of a new technocratic generation should not necessarily be taken to imply a challenge to the securocrats' approach. The technocrats have experienced the disorder of the 1990s and share a commitment to a strong, centralized state. They are also personally ambitious and have no interest in challenging the status quo for its own sake. However, their rise does mean that they are situationally rather than ideologically committed to the current official line; they would have a much easier time switching to a different code and worldview if the circumstances—and self-interest—warranted it. In other words, although the slow succession of a new generation of technocratic managers in the law enforcement community will not itself bring change, it at least makes it possible.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ilya Rozhdzhestvenskii, “Bastrykin pokinet post glavy SKR,” *RBC*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/09/2016/57d9380e9a79470e59d9d3fc>; Mark Galeotti, “Goodbye Bastrykin?” *oD:Russia*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/goodbye-bastrykin>.

¹⁹ “Putin naznachil Viktora Strigunova pervym zamglavy Rosgvardii,” *RIA Novosti*, January 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200127/1563935452.html>.

²⁰ “U glavkoma Rosgvardii Zolotova poyavilsya pervyi zamestitel’, kotoryi kormil soldat sobach'im kormom,” *Leningradskaya Pravda*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.lenpravda.ru/brief/282858.html>.

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