

Russia's New "National Guard" Special Forces and Counter-Terrorism Units

By [South Front](#), [J. Hawk](#), [Daniel Deiss](#), and [Edwin Watson](#)

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On April 5, 2016, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree establishing a new paramilitary formation, the National Guard, out of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Internal Troops, and ordering a number of organizational changes in the MVD and other associated agencies. The first commander of the National Guard will be the Internal Troops commander since 2014, Army General Viktor Vasilyevich Zolotov, who has had a long career in the intelligence and security services dating to the 1980s.

The National Guard will include the Internal Troops as well as the SOBR and OMON special riot control and counter-terrorism units, which will result in a paramilitary internal security organization directly comparable to France's Gendarmerie Nationale. This will provide the National Guard commander and, ultimately, the President, with an integrated internal security organization capable of fine-tuning the level of violence, depending on the level of the threat, starting with Maidan-style not-so-peaceful protests and ending with full-scale insurgencies.

During the Chechen Wars, Internal Troops became almost indistinguishable from the Armed Forces in that they were using artillery and armored vehicles. While there is no mention of the National Guard's external role, its mission might also involve peacekeeping and law enforcement operations in, say, the Donbass, where their presence would be less controversial than of the military.

Instead of being part of the MVD subordinate to its minister, the National Guard's commander will answer directly to the President, which implies institutional standing on a par with other security services and ministries. National Guard's sphere of responsibility will include combating terrorism and organized crime. Furthermore, the MVD will absorb a number of separate federal agencies, such as the Federal Migration Service (FMS) and the Federal Drug Trafficking Interdiction Service (FSKN).

These far-reaching changes suggest that Russia is taking seriously the threat, voiced by ISIS, al-Nusra, and several of its international sponsors, that it will "pay a price" for defeating Islamist forces in Syria. Even though ISIS cannot avoid a crushing defeat in Syria at this point, many of its militants, leaders, and organizational networks will migrate or be transferred by their international sponsors to other theaters of the global hybrid war. While they include Libya, a more worrisome prospect is their use to destabilize Central Asia and perhaps even the Caucasus.

The combined focus on drug trafficking, organized crime, migration, and terrorism is not

coincidental, because in combination these are vital elements of hybrid warfare practiced by Islamist forces. We have seen these factors in action, individually and in combination, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and most recently in Western Europe, where the migrant stream is being used to entrench organized crime groups with ties to the Middle East. These organized crime networks can then serve as a “delivery vehicle” of sorts for terrorists who can use the tried and true illegal transportation networks to enter Europe and perpetrate acts of terrorism. One should expect a similar model to be used soon in Central Asia, with Russia being the ultimate target. For all of Obama’s talk about Russia’s economy being “torn to shreds”, the fact remains that its labor market is still large enough to absorb large numbers of migrant workers from adjoining countries.

Many of them come from Central Asia. There are significant organized crime networks all over Russia with ties to the Caucasus and Central Asia which are engaged in drug trafficking and which likewise could be used for terrorist purposes. In order for such tactics to be effectively countered, a single government agency dealing with all of the components of hybrid war in an integrated manner will be much more effective than having several agencies each attempting to address individual aspects of the problem.

The new National Guard appears to be an instrument that is directly intended to make the hybrid war doctrines fail when applied against Russia and its close allies.

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