

The Russian National Guard

An Asset for Putin at Home and Abroad



American Security Project

Perspective

Patrick Savage

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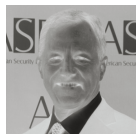
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Lee Cullum

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Nicholas Clark

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Admiral William Fallon, USN (Ret.)

Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.



Raj Fernando

Raj Fernando is CEO and founder of Chopper Trading, a technology based trading firm headquartered in Chicago.



Scott Gilbert

Scott Gilbert is a Partner of Gilbert LLP and Managing Director of Reneo LLC.



Vice Admiral Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)

Vice Admiral Gunn is the President of the Institute of Public Research at the CNA Corporation, a non-profit corporation in Virginia.



The Honorable Chuck Hagel

Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



Lieutenant General Claudia Kennedy, USA (Ret.)

Lieutenant General Kennedy was the first woman to achieve the rank of three-star general in the United States Army.



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John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



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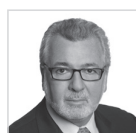
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LtGen Norman Seip, USAF (Ret.)

Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.

In this Report:

In 2016 Russian President Vladimir Putin established The Russian National Guard, a new paramilitary force combining several previous internal security forces under a unified structure answering directly to him. Multiple, plausible reasons have been given for its creation, including counter-terrorism and protecting the Kremlin from the threat of internal dissent. However, there are additional roles the National Guard could undertake that have been neglected in existing analysis. Examining its structure, armament, leadership, organization, and other factors show that the National Guard is uniquely suited to fulfill two key roles for Putin. First, it appears to be growing a capacity to engage in the type of hybrid warfare operations that Russia has been undertaking in its near abroad. Second, it could act as a hedge for Putin against the growing influence and power of the security services and the regular military.

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IN BRIEF

- The Russian National Guard has been authorized to operate abroad and provides Putin with an additional tool for hybrid warfare operations, separate from the military and security services.
- The National Guard is equipping itself with military-grade heavy weapons, recruiting specialized personnel from military schools, and developing both expeditionary capabilities as well as capabilities in cyber warfare and electronic warfare that are useful in a hybrid warfare strategy.
- The leadership of the National Guard are adherents to the strategy of hybrid warfare, the organization answers directly to the President of Russia without reporting to any government ministry, and its commander has a close personal history with Putin going back to the 1990s.
- The National Guard may act as a hedge against members and supporters of the security services, who have been gaining increasing power within the Russian elite in recent years at the expense of liberal elements of Putin's inner circle.
- The National Guard also may serve to counter the influence and threat of a revitalized Russian Armed Forces, having roughly the same manpower levels as the military's ground forces and the ability to assume direct command of military units in a crisis situation.

About the Author

Patrick Savage is a Master's Student in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, concentrating in U.S. National Security with a focus on Russia and the former-Soviet Union. He previously served as a congressional staffer for U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum.

Introduction

The Federal National Guard Troops Service of the Russian Federation, also known as National Guard of the Russian Federation—or informally as the *Rosgvardiya* (Russian Guard), is a paramilitary security force of the Russian Federation. It was initially created on April 6th, 2016, by Russian President Vladimir Putin through Presidential Decree. On June 22nd, 2016, the Russian parliament passed a bill submitted by Putin that finalized the establishment of the National Guard in federal law.

Since its establishment, there has been a great deal of speculation in both Western and Russian press about the purpose of the National Guard, with a number of theories being put forward. In the West and the Russian opposition, one common narrative has been one of Putin needing a more reliable force for dealing with political dissidents, protestors, and other internal threats ahead of upcoming elections. Putin’s government and supporters have characterized this less as a fear of their own people, but a fear of Western-backed elements attempting a coup through a ‘Color Revolution’ like those that swept through several states of the former-Soviet Union in the early 2000s.^{1 2} In addition to the Color Revolution threat, the Kremlin has repeatedly put terrorism front and center in justifying the creation of the National Guard, citing a myriad of growing terrorist threats on Russia’s periphery. Assisting Russian law enforcement in the fight against organized crime has been another rationale.³



Russian National Guard troops in the 2017 Victory Day Parade. Russian National Guard Photo.

These reasonings for the creation of the National Guard are not unfounded, and it is true that the force can and will most likely serve the Kremlin in all these capacities. But new information on the development of the National Guard since its founding raises deeper questions about why Putin needs this force, and what other roles it might be intended to fulfill.

This paper will argue that the National Guard offers two key capacities for the Kremlin that are largely being overlooked. First, it provides a force with a degree of deniability and secrecy that can take the initiative in the types of hybrid warfare operations the Russian Federation has undertaken in recent years. Second, it provides a hedging force against internal forces Putin may see as becoming too strong, such as the security and intelligence services and the military.

The New “Little Green Men?”

2014 saw the rise of the term “Little Green Men,” referring to the masked, unmarked, green camouflaged Russian soldiers masquerading as “local militia” that emerged from the naval base in Sevastopol and systematically seized control over the Crimean Peninsula leading up to its annexation back into Russia.⁴ This image was bolstered by Russian troops surging into Eastern Ukraine in the midst of a rebellion by pro-Russian separatist forces, while the Kremlin denied their presence with both it and the separatist forces claiming any Russians assisting the rebels were only “volunteers.”⁵

In the years since the annexation of Crimea, the escalation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War, the NATO alliance has become progressively more worried about Russia's next moves. The Zapad-17 military exercises between Russia and Belarus in October of 2017 caused intense worry bordering on panic from some NATO member states such as Poland and the Baltic States—as well as in NATO partner Ukraine. Worried that the exercises were cover for a new invasion by Russia, or the annexation of Belarus, the exercises caught the rapt attention of NATO, observer groups, and the international media.^{6 7 8}

In the end, the exercises passed largely without incident.⁹ But the reaction demonstrated that Russia's military may now, in some ways, be a victim of its own recent successes. The victory of the Little Green Men in seizing Crimea, preventing the Ukrainian military from stamping out pro-Russian rebels in the Donbass region, and then storming into Syria to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad have once again turned the Russian military into something of a boogeyman in the eyes of Russia's adversaries and rivals. Everywhere the Russian military goes and everything it does is now put under a microscope. In the Baltic region, NATO aircraft scramble to intercept Russian aircraft out of Kaliningrad on a regular basis.¹⁰ Back at the Pentagon, the Defense Intelligence Agency has resumed publishing reports on Russian military power for the first time since the end of the Cold War.¹¹



Russian National Guard Special Forces troops participate in a field training exercise. Russian National Guard Photo.

Making his enemies believe that his forces are “ten feet tall” may be good for Putin in terms of prestige, ego, deterrence, and intimidation. But the disadvantage of this is that it could make carrying out any new surprise operations similar to the annexation of Crimea or the sudden intervention in Syria much more difficult now that both professional and amateur Russia watchers are monitoring his armed forces more vigilantly. But Putin now has the ability to substitute his Army in missions on Russia's periphery, as the National Guard becomes uniquely equipped as a hybrid warfare force.

A Tool for the Near Abroad

From the moment the National Guard was created, questions were raised about whether it would or could be used for foreign operations. Early on in the organization's existence, its commander suggested to Kremlin-tied media that it could at least be sent abroad for peacekeeping and stability operations.¹² The organization denied, however, that it was operating in Syria after it was suggested by Ekho Mosckvy radio in the spring of 2017.¹³ But by June, the National Guard did an about-face, with its deputy director claiming that the organization would in fact be able to undertake missions abroad at the President's discretion.¹⁴

Use of the National Guard in surprise or covert foreign operations makes sense for Russia in several ways given its recent strategies regarding hybrid warfare. The term has come up consistently since the annexation of Crimea, describing the way that Russia has blended together overt military means covert operations, and an assortment of non-military tools and tactics such as information operations and cyber-attacks. This has blurred the line between full scale war and peace, creating a “gray zone” of warfare that enables Russia to pursue goals while avoiding outright conflict with an adversary.¹⁵

The National Guard's suitability for hybrid warfare is reinforced by the fact that it is not strictly a military organization. While it is certainly a paramilitary institution organized along military lines with a military structure, it is not part of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Its largest predecessor, the Internal Troops, was subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) and acted as a paramilitary supplement to police and law enforcement with history going back to Imperial Russia.¹⁶ As such, if used in foreign operations, the National Guard may offer Putin wiggle room semantics he can use to manipulate perception of Russia's role in a conflict. This essentially grants him the ability to say that technically, the Russian "Armed Forces" are not operating in a given country or region when they are accused of interfering.

The Advantage of Ambiguity

Exploring the issue of uncertainty further, the National Guard has an advantage enabled by the lack of knowledge about it thus far. Information about the organization has been strictly controlled since it was first organized. Press are prohibited from reporting on the location of National Guard troops, and the organization has been training its own "military journalists" to report on its activities.¹⁷ ¹⁸ The only information that is openly available on the organization of the National Guard covers its leadership and structure at a broad level. Only fragments of publicly released information are available about the types and quantities of equipment and hardware it has at its disposal. In addition, there is little publicly-available, substantive analysis of the force from Western governments, think tanks or other non-governmental organizations.

Simply put, a great deal about the National Guard is still unknown more than a year after its creation. This could prove an asset to Russia if it plans to use the National Guard in "Little Green Men" type situations, generating uncertainty and plausible deniability on its part about just who may be engaging in a covert action—as well as keeping its enemies deliberately in the dark on just how capable the force may be.

A Growing Arsenal

What is known about the armament and equipment of the National Guard speaks to a mission that goes far beyond counter-terrorism and maintenance of public order. The National Guard has purchased weapons such as thermobaric rocket launchers, capable of engaging hardened positions and light-armored vehicles.¹⁹ It is also reportedly to be issued new advanced UAVs, which the National Guard claims are hardened against electronic-warfare techniques so they cannot be 'hijacked' or disrupted by adversaries.²⁰ This is in addition to a series of advanced surveillance aerostats the National Guard also plans on purchasing.²¹ Weapons and equipment like these certainly have application in counter-terrorism and internal security, but in the context of Russia's recent hybrid warfare activities, they have an additional utility in irregular, covert warfare. This is all in addition to the fact that the National Guard has apparently been given carte blanche to requisition equipment from the Defense Ministry.²²



Russian National Guard troops draw weapons and equipment during a nation-wide readiness check. Russian National Guard Photo.

The types of talent and expertise the National Guard has been recruiting also raises further questions about the types of operations that the force will be involved in going forward. Just after its establishment as a force, the National Guard moved to recruit potential junior officers out of cadets in the Ministry of Defense's education system. Despite recruiting out of military schools, a spokesperson was quick to clarify they were not seeking combined arms officers out of the military—such as those specialized in infantry, armor, artillery, or air defense—but were looking for specialists in more benign areas such as communications, repair, driving, and even food and clothing services for troops.²³ It remains to be seen how true this is though, as the National Guard has denied seeking many capabilities only to acquire them weeks or months later. The very prospect of creating the organization was flatly denied by Putin's official spokesperson in 2012, only to be proven wrong just four years later.²⁴

The very scope of the type of combat the National Guard could engage in is being expanded as well. In October 2017, state-run news agency TASS reported a statement that the National Guard would be establishing a “maritime brigade,” ostensibly to provide security for Russia's bridge to the annexed territory of Crimea that



Troops from a Russian National Guard combat swimmers team conduct a dive to demonstrate their skills. Russian National Guard Photo.

is currently under construction.²⁵ The proximity of a unit of this type close to where Russia is already engaging in hybrid warfare hostilities against Ukraine is certainly suspect. Pro-Russian media also reports that the National Guard will receive its own air force and navy, which potentially offers additional expeditionary capability to the near abroad.²⁶

The National Guard has also been cultivating experience and capabilities in electronic warfare, cyber warfare, and information warfare—all important components of a hybrid warfare strategy—despite the National Guard initially denying it was seeking these capabilities as well.²⁷ The organization has stated that it has established specialized IT units to monitor social

media activity and is actively working to expand these units further.²⁸ Activities in the near abroad—as well as information operations by the Russian government in the United States over the past several years—have shown that misinformation and propaganda, and other forms of cyber and electronic warfare are key to Russian hybrid warfare tactics.

An Army Led by Hybrid Warriors

It is also telling that the leaders of the National Guard are very much adherents to the concepts of hybrid warfare. In May of 2017, former Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky wrote an article for the Russian military publication *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* on the topic of threats to Russia and the role the National Guard will play. Now serving as an adviser to the National Guard's senior leadership, Baluyevsky reinforced the threat of foreign-backed color revolutions to Russia, writing at length on the changing nature of war in the 21st century. Baluyevsky speaks of hybrid warfare, stating that in his opinion, “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.”²⁹ Baluyevsky characterizes Russia as a potential victim of this kind of conflict. But put in the context of the National Guard's capabilities, and Russia's recent activities to that extent in Ukraine, the potential for the National Guard to be the leading force for Russia in hybrid warfare grows more likely.

A Direct Line of Command to Putin

In terms of being potentially used abroad, the National Guard has another advantage for Putin in its structure and chain of command. After having been removed from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) the National Guard does not report to any ministry or minister of the Russian government, with its commander having his own equal seat among members in Putin's cabinet. Said commander is currently General Victor Zolotov, formerly the commander of the Presidential Security Service and Putin's personal bodyguard and judo partner since the mid-1990s.^{30 31}

With this arrangement, the National Guard could potentially be more responsive to orders and be able to carry out operations at Putin's command faster and with less red tape, bureaucracy, or institutional resistance than if it had to go through the MVD or the Ministry of Defense. The fact that it answers directly to the President—and is in fact beholden to him for its creation—may mean that Putin would feel more comfortable with assigning it sensitive missions and assignments abroad based on its loyalty. This loyalty factor also plays a role in another key reason for the guard's existence: protection against other sources of power in Russia.

Hedging Bets on the Homefront

The National Guard clearly has the potential for operations abroad that serve Russia's national interests. However, returning to the homefront, the National Guard may have an additional domestic purpose that goes beyond those that have been claimed by the Kremlin or asserted by the opposition. That purpose may be to protect Putin's position from the increasingly powerful leadership of the security services and the military, and their allies elsewhere in the Russian elite.

When Vladimir Putin took office as acting-President of Russia in 1999 following the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin, the former director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) did so with the support of current and former professionals from throughout the security, intelligence, and armed services. These individuals, collectively known as the *siloviki*, have been instrumental in expanding and solidifying Putin's power base. But as time has gone on, it has become apparent that this bloc is not always in lock-step behind their leader—or other factions he has counted on for support in the past.

Neutralizing Internal Adversaries

The *siloviki* have played a key role in Putin's rule from the beginning, but in recent years their power has become even more pervasive. This became obvious in 2016 following the arrest of Minister of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukayev on corruption charges. Ulyukayev had been one of the most prominent liberals remaining in Putin's cabinet prior to his arrest. For years, Putin has played economy-minded liberals and the security-minded *siloviki* against one another within the corridors of power to maintain his power and prevent one group from becoming too powerful. But recently the *siloviki* have made significant gains against the old liberal faction within the Putin circle, with the liberals' power rapidly diminishing.^{32 33} The *siloviki* have solidified their control over the security services, the military, and law enforcement. Now they have extended that control over the financial sectors and elsewhere throughout the government. The *siloviki* have effectively rendered Putin's strategy of balancing and setting different influencing groups against one another null and void as they set up a single center of power within Russia.³⁴

With that in mind, certain actions Putin has taken in establishing and developing the National Guard serve as hedges against the growing power and independence of the *siloviki*, as well as against the institutions they lead. One obvious example of this has involved the National Guard and Russia's regional governors. Over his tenure, Putin has appointed a number of *siloviki* to governorships and other local posts across Russia as part of a strategy of solidifying his power base and dealing with problem areas of dubious political loyalty.³⁵ Now Putin has requested a new unit be established within the National Guard to act as bodyguards for regional governors—as well as to protect “other” figures that go undefined in the draft legislation that has been sent to the State Duma. Though supposedly done to protect these figures from harm, this move has been interpreted in both the Western and Russian media as intended to bring these regional governors under tighter control of the Kremlin.³⁶



Commander-in-Chief of the Russian National Guard, General Victor Zolotov, inspects samples of new uniforms. Russian National Guard Photo.

The National Guard has also facilitated Putin in bypassing or sidelining problematic individuals and institutions back at the center of power in Moscow. For instance: The National Guard was created primarily out of paramilitary forces taken out of the MVD. Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, appointed in 2012, was formerly the Moscow police chief and a career police officer who has been widely viewed as a technocrat who is disconnected from the internal power struggles of Putin's supporters.³⁷ To that end, Kolokoltsev has also been reportedly “uncomfortable” with a role of physically enforcing the Kremlin's will—something that has been echoed by officials at other levels of the MVD.³⁸ In 2014, rumors even emerged that he would potentially be replaced by the now National Guard Chief Zolotov as interior minister.³⁹ Rather than fire

Kolokoltsev and risk a backlash for firing a non-controversial, technocratic minister, Putin has simply sidelined and weakened him on security issues, removing a significant portion of the MVD's power and putting it under his direct command. However, the Interior Ministry was only one of the large armed bodies that had potential to threaten Putin before its claws were clipped, the other being the military.

Countering the Threat of a Resurgent Military

The Russian military was in a state of disarray and decay when Putin assumed power, a far cry from the prestigious and massive Soviet military that faced off against the United States and NATO during the Cold War. It was rife with corruption, incompetence, obsolete equipment, and all manner of other endemic issues. The sting of its disastrous campaign against rebel forces in Chechnya five years prior was still fresh, as was the loss of prestige and purpose it experienced as it finalized its withdrawal from Germany and the rest of the former-Warsaw Pact states throughout the 1990s.⁴⁰ But over the two decades of Putin's leadership, the Russian military has drastically transformed itself. While it still faces many internal issues that have yet to be addressed, it has rapidly improved itself and its capabilities and continues to learn from its mistakes and success in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. It has grown leaner, worked to attract more professional contract soldiers, replaced aging equipment with newer technology, invested in new and emerging capabilities, and reorganized itself into a far more effective organizational structure.⁴¹ The Russian military that is now coming to maturation is a different beast to the Soviet military of the Cold War and especially from the military of the 1990s.

A stronger, more confident Russian military may have obvious benefits for Putin, as they would for any great power that seeks to protect and further its national interests in a changing world. But what has been largely overlooked are the liabilities this also brings to Putin's position. Historically, the Russian military has sometimes been as much a source of worry as it has been of strength for the country's leaders. Russian history is full of examples of the military and its members acting as kingmakers or as spoilers. The Decemberists Revolt of 1825, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, and the attempted coup by Communist hardliners in the KGB and the military against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 were all instances where some or all of the military turned on the ruler of Russia.^{42 43 44 45} When times of great stress and schism arrive in Russia, the military has not always proven itself a reliable force for whoever is at the center of power at that time.

In 1999, Putin had few reasons to worry about the Russian military acting decisively against him if they disagreed with him strongly on an issue, given the dismal state of affairs within the armed forces at the time. But now that the military has once again found its footing and its confidence, this possibility may no longer be so remote. Here, the timing of the National Guard's creation is interesting. In 2012, when the news was first leaked that a National Guard was even being considered, the Russian military was still trying to find itself. Though it had won the short war against Georgia in 2008, the conflict exposed many weaknesses and shortcomings, leading to an ongoing reform and modernization effort that continues today.⁴⁶ It wasn't until 2014 and 2015, with the annexation of Crimea, intervention in Eastern Ukraine, and the salvation provided to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria that the Russian military proved its capabilities. It was only a year after the Syrian intervention, in 2016, that the National Guard's creation was then announced.



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with senior officers of the Russian National Guard. Russian National Guard Photo.

Rebirth of the NKVD?

Putin has already taken action to subordinate the regular army to the National Guard in a literal sense. In a Presidential Decree signed in May 2017, Putin ordered that regional commanders of the National Guard can assume command of operational formations of the Russian Armed Forces as necessary to carry out the National Guard's mission. Previously, it was always possible for the Soviet and Russian militaries to assume control of the MVD's Internal Troops in a time of war or emergency. Now the dynamic has been switched, with a force that answers directly to Putin capable of taking control of regular military units.

Control of the military by an internal security force in on this scale in post-Soviet Russia is unprecedented. The only other actions in that vein have occurred exclusively on a small, ad-hoc scale during the Chechnya wars when MVD forces sometimes took control of small units from the Armed Forces.⁴⁷ With this new, far more extensive capacity for control, the National Guard could act as a political minder or check on the independence of the military. Something of this scale has not been seen in Russia since the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

The ideological and political bent of the National Guard, in contrast to some of its other declared or assumed roles, is one that its leadership has in many ways embraced rather than concealed or obscured. In a November 2016 interview with *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, former Duma member turned National Guard adviser Alexander Khinshtein drew parallels between the National Guard and the old Soviet NKVD internal security agency, referring to heroic deeds of NKVD units that participated in the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II. Khinshtein uses that experience to reinforce the point that the Russian public needs to better understand the role the guard plays.⁴⁸ What goes unsaid in the interview is the fact that the NKVD's troops were used at Stalingrad and other battles to prevent the retreat of Soviet Red Army forces, firing on those who attempted to retreat or flee from battle.⁴⁹ To say nothing of the fact that the organization—a predecessor to the Soviet KGB—acted as Stalin's secret police and political vanguard, responsible for keeping him in power, the military in check, and citizenry in line.

When looking at the National Guard in the context of the NKVD and the role it fulfilled in relation to the Russian military, the numbers tell an interesting story as well. The NKVD had to contend with a Red Army that was significantly larger than it, with millions of men at its disposal. 2017 estimates from the Department of Defense put the current strength of the Russian ground forces at around 350,000 active duty troops.^{50 51} At the same time, the most recent estimates for the National Guard put it at about the same number, or even tens of thousands more than the regular army: anywhere from 340,000 to 400,000 active duty troops.⁵² Putin has effectively created a lighter equipped force parallel to the army that answers directly to him, much in the same way as the divisions of the NKVD kept the regular Red Army in line for Stalin leading up to and through World War II. Like Stalin, Putin may be starting to become paranoid as the internal power dynamics of his regime continue to shift beneath his feet. But unlike Stalin, Putin's personal guard may be on a more equal footing with the regular military and be more capable of keeping it under control should it become unreliable.

Conclusions

It is entirely plausible that the Russian National Guard could be used to fight terrorism or protect Russia from the foreign-backed color revolutions that its leadership fears. It is also plausible, and more concerning, that it could be used to crush domestic political opposition and dissent. But in assessing what is known about its capabilities, leadership, and the political environment both within and outside Russia that it will be operating in, it becomes clear that its utility is not limited to those missions and will likely not remain confined to them for long. The Russian National Guard is uniquely positioned to act as Putin's enforcer throughout Russia's near abroad. In addition, it is in a strong position to act as a hedge against his own military and security forces and their powerful leaders and alumni amidst the backdrop of changing power dynamics within the circles of Russian elite.

There is still much that we do not know about the Russian National Guard just over a year after its creation. But it is important to remember that the force is still young, and will likely continue to change and mature over the coming years. With Vladimir Putin highly likely to be elected to a fourth term as the President of the Russian Federation, the future of the force, its goals, missions, and structure all lie with its creator and will shift in accordance with his wishes, fears, and goals going forward. Watching the development of the National Guard closely in the coming years could provide valuable insight into Putin's objectives both within and outside Russia, and should remain a high priority for any Russia watcher seeking to better understand the secretive Kremlin environment.

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We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

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