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FEDERAL NATIONAL GUARD SERVICE AS PART OF THE INTERNAL SECURITY CONSTRUCTION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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Abstract

The aim of the publication is to present the role of the Federal National Guard Service in building internal security of the Russian Federation. The article outlines the circumstances of the Service's creation and the legal framework in which it operates, including the tasks it performs. The structure of the formation and its potential have

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been analysed, and the place of Rosgvardia in the territorial defence being developed for the war has been shown. Also, the experience of its use during the ongoing war with Ukraine has been presented. Theoretical methods such as analysis, synthesis and inference based on available sources, including on-line sources, and scientific studies have been used to achieve the adopted aim.

Keywords: National Guard of the Russian Federation, internal security, Russian-Ukrainian war.

Abstrakt

Federalna Służba Gwardii Narodowej jako element budowy bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego Federacji Rosyjskiej

Celem publikacji jest zaprezentowanie roli Federalnej Służby Gwardii Narodowej w budowie bezpieczeństwa wewnętrznego Federacji Rosyjskiej. W artykule przedstawiono okoliczności jej powstania oraz prawne uwarunkowania funkcjonowania, w tym wykonywane zadania. Poddano analizie strukturę formacji i jej potencjał. Ukazano miejsce Rosgvardii w rozwijanej na czas wojny obronie terytorialnej. Zaprezentowano także doświadczenia jej użycia w czasie trwającej wojny z Ukrainą. Do realizacji przyjętego celu wykorzystane zostały metody teoretyczne, takie jak: analiza, synteza i wnioskowanie na podstawie dostępnych źródeł, w tym internetowych, oraz opracowań naukowych.

Słowa kluczowe: Gwardia Narodowa Federacji Rosyjskiej, bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska.

Introduction

Military formations responsible for defending the rulers and the regime, as well as fighting the opposition, have been a permanent feature of the Russia's internal security system for several hundred years. The predecessors of today's National Guard may be found in the days of Ivan the Terrible's opichnina, and later the Tsarist Okhrana, the Soviet NKVD and the KGB. Formed since 2016, the Federal National Guard Service, although it also performs territorial defence tasks, is primarily a factor in stabilising and consolidating Vladimir Putin's power. It has proved its loyalty to the Kremlin both by supporting the police in suppressing opposition protests and during the march of the Wagner group's mercenaries on the capital.

The establishment and tasks of the Federal National Guard Service

On 5 April 2016, President Vladimir Putin restructured the system of internal security institutions for the first time since 2003. The changes were introduced on the basis of presidential decrees with immediate legal effect, and they significantly altered the

distribution of power and competences between the ministries responsible for the internal security of the state. Based on the organisational capacity of the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, the Federal National Guard Service (FNGS), directly subordinate to the President, was created. Its head was the former commander of the Internal Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs and formerly the long-standing head of the Presidential Security Service, Viktor Zolotov². At the same time, the Federal Service for the Control of Drug Trafficking (FSCDT) and the Federal Migration Service (FMS) were abolished, and their structures became specialised divisions of the Ministry for Internal Affairs (Roslan 2017: 168; Zochowski, online).

Details of how the National Guard operated were revealed to the Russian media by its commander, Army General Viktor Zolotov. The defence and interior ministries were to be involved in the process of creating the new formation in parallel. It was to take place in three stages. The first one was to be completed by the end of 2016, with the integration of all the Ministry for Internal Affairs bodies and branches into the National Guard. The second phase was expected to last until the end of August 2017 and would conclude once a full normative and legal base aligned with federal law was created. The organisation of the “National Guard” was expected to be accomplished by the end of 2018, when all the bodies and subdivisions to form it would become a unified formation. It was assumed that the new formation would involve 340,000 men (Dura, online).

The legal basis for its functioning became the law “On the Troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation” of 3 July 2016. This document defines the main purpose of its establishment, which is as follows: “The National Guard is a military organisation created to ensure state and public security, to protect human and civil rights and freedoms.”

According to the law of 3 July 2016, the National Guard’s main tasks include:

- participation, in conjunction with the authorities of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, in measures to protect public order, ensure public safety, and secure order during a state of emergency;
- participation in the fight against terrorism and securing the legal regime for counter-terrorism operations;
- participation in the fight against extremism;
- participation in the territorial defence of the Russian Federation;
- protection of important state facilities and special cargoes, in accordance with the catalogue approved by the Russian government;
- border service support of the Federal Security Service in protecting the state border;

² Victor Zolotov (b. 1954) – worked for the KGB (security service division) during the Soviet era and, after the collapse of the USSR, protected President Boris Yeltsin, then, the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, and, finally, Prime Minister and President Vladimir Putin. From 2000 to 2013, Zolotov was a deputy head of the Federal Protective Service and the head of the Presidential Security Service. In 2013, he became the deputy commander of the Interior Troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs; a year later, the president appointed him the First Deputy Minister for Internal Affairs and the commander of the Interior Troops; see more broadly: *General Viktor Zolotov*, online.

- protection of members of RF authorities (Darczewska 2020: 10–11).

The Guard's tasks were made more specific by a presidential decree of 30 September 2016, which approved of the formation's statutes and highlighted its control function "in the sphere of private security activity, in the sphere of private detective activity, and in the sphere of extra-ministerial protection". The annex to the decree embraced a slightly broader catalogue of the Guard's tasks than in the law; these included:

- development and implementation of state policy in designated spheres of activity;
- preparation of normative-legal regulations in designated spheres of activity;
- organising the participation of National Guard troops in law enforcement and ensuring public safety;
- organising the participation of National Guard troops in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and ensuring the legal order of counter-terrorism operations;
- organising the participation of National Guard troops in the territorial defence of the Russian Federation;
- maintaining National Guard troops in necessary readiness;
- organisation of the use of National Guard troops in accordance with the law of the Russian Federation;
- implementation of projects for the expansion and development of the National Guard troops;
- exercising federal state control over: circulation of weapons in civilian and official use, weapons given as prizes, ammunition, as well as the technical condition of small arms and official weapons in temporary use by citizens and organisations; private security and detective activities in the Russian Federation; ensuring the security of the fuel and energy complex; activity of legal entity security units with special statutory tasks, as well as departmental security units;
- providing social and legal protection to servicemen, people serving in the National Guard troops and having police ranks (collaborators), federal civilian government officials, citizens released from military service in the National Guard troops, their family members and other people subject to social security by the Guard in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (Darczewska 2020: 11–12).

These tasks indicate the duality of the formation's mission: a police-protection mission (protection of public order, protection of the state's critical infrastructure) and a military mission (participation in combating non-military threats such as diversion, terrorism, extremism, and participation in the territorial defence of the state) (Darczewska 2020: 12).

The Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 24 May 2017 approving of the "Statute on the Operational-Territorial Grouping of the Troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation" introduced an important provision that, in a crisis situation, formations of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation may be subordinated to the command of the National Guard to support them in fulfilling their tasks. The implication would be that, in the Kremlin's mind, an internal enemy poses a much more serious threat to the state than an external enemy. Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, a former Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, and later an advisor to the National Guard commander, admitted that the National Guard was created primarily as a response to the possible outbreak of a "colour revolution" in Russia (Golts, online).

The National Guard troops take part in joint exercises with the Russian Armed Forces and other formations responsible for state security. The large-scale Russian-Belarusian Zapad-21 activities are an example (Clark, Barros, online).

Interestingly, although in building the new formation, reference was made, among other things, to Western models, including the USA, in the minds of elites and the public, its mission evoked different associations. Already in the autumn of 2016, in a statement to the “Moskovsky Komsomolets”, a former Duma deputy, Alexander Khinshtein, highlighted the similarities between the National Guard and the old Soviet NKVD internal security service, citing the heroic deeds of the NKVD units that took part in the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II. The politician forgot to add that at Stalingrad, as well as in general during the “Great Patriotic War”, the NKVD was used primarily as a barrage formation to prevent the withdrawal or escape of soldiers from the battlefield, and as a key element of the repressive apparatus (Savage 2017: 8).

The Rosgvardia’s personnel – although its priority tasks revolve around the provision of internal security and territorial defence – also operate outside the country. They were, for example, sent to Syria, where the Russian guards defused explosives and escorted humanitarian convoys (Hardie, online).

The structure of the National Guard

The Guard troops are deployed on the territory of the Russian Federation in eight districts. These include:

- the Central District (based in Moscow)
- the Northwest District (St Petersburg)
- the North Caucasian District (Pyatigorsk)
- the Southern District (Rostov-on-Don)
- the Volga District (Nizhny Novgorod)
- the Ural District (Yekaterinburg)
- the Siberian District (Novosibirsk)
- the Eastern District (Khabarovsk).

This structure coincides with the administrative division of the Russian Federation (Darczewska 2020: 14–15).

A decision to create 84 territorial bodies of the National Guard – one for each Russian region was made. An exception exists for the Leningrad Region, where a separate authority was allocated only for St. Petersburg (Dura, online).

In addition to the regular units of the internal army, the Russian National Guard includes structures for militarised extra-ministerial protection, previously subordinated to the Ministry for Internal Affairs, structures for supervising and licensing security and detective activities, structures for licensing and registering the use of official and private weapons, as well as a federal state enterprise, “Ochрана”, providing security services for a fee (Darczewska 2020: 18).

The special purpose police units incorporated into the Guard (e.g. Rus, Rosich, Skif, Rys, Ural, Yermak, Nars, Kuzbas, Tarnik, Typhoon, Bulat, Zubr) differed in their training, legal status of officers/soldiers, and tasks. Units from different regions had

different uniforms and equipment (police equipment was partly financed from local budgets) (Darczewska 2020: 18).

The National Guard includes mobile special-purpose units (OMON), special rapid reaction troops (SOBR), and internal troops. OMON is well-trained units that are conditioned for crowd control, riot control, policing, and police support. They are deployed in every region and major city, and are often present ensuring order during anti-government protests. SOBR, on the other hand, consists of elite police units that are dedicated to fighting organised crime and, according to observers, operate in a similar way to SWAT teams in the United States. Internal troops are paramilitary formations spread throughout the state. Some of them are fully professionalised and capable of acting as light mechanised infantry in counter-insurgency operations. The force is organised into two divisions and ten brigades. The best known of this group and considered elite is the 1st Independent Special Purpose Division, also known as the “Dzerzhinsky Division”. In addition, mention can be made of the special purpose forces (Specnaz) subordinated to the Guard’s command, such as the 604th Special Purpose Centre. However, a large proportion of the interior troops have weaker combat capabilities, are manned by soldiers doing compulsory military service by conscription, and perform primarily protection tasks (Bowen 2020: 2).

The forces of Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of the Chechen Republic, are also nominally under the command of the National Guard. The so-called “Kadyrovites” number 20,000–30,000 soldiers, who, however, often conduct operations that are independent of Moscow (Bowen 2020: 2).

National Guard soldiers have dual equipment: combat equipment (analogous to Russian infantry equipment) and special equipment for law enforcement (waistcoats, helmets with opening plastic beavers, shields, rubber batons, tear gas canisters, gas grenades, water cannons, etc.). They are also characterised by the “Ratnik” personal equipment or the use of modern reconnaissance and monitoring systems, including drones (Darczewska 2020: 21–22).

Territorial defence

The creation of the National Guard was also part of the implementation of the “Russian Federation’s Defence Plan of 2016–2020”, approved in November 2015. Indeed, the formation has become one of the key elements of the Russian Federation’s territorial defence. As Col. Igor Kardash, head of the National Guard’s Strategic Research Centre, notes, it is the foundation of the modern, effective territorial defence system currently being developed in Russia. He also recalls that non-military threats (terrorism, radical social groups spreading extremist ideologies, foreign non-governmental organisations, citizens acting against the territorial integrity and destabilising the situation in Russia) have long been recognised as potential threats to the security of the Russian Federation, as reflected in Russian war doctrines and national security strategies. In his opinion, the threats defined in the strategic documents fit perfectly into the catalogue of tasks of the Guard, determining its place and role in the new military organisation of the state.

In a crisis situation that poses a threat to internal security, the Guard is supposed to be one element of repression against Kremlin opponents.

In Russia, there is no close equivalent to the Polish or Western Territorial Defence Forces. The Russian territorial defence is, by definition, a system of undertakings carried out during martial law. It should be noted here that Russia does not foresee the possibility of an armed attack on its territory. The territorial defence is a service of protective and rescue formations, as well as a reserve service to protect the rear and extend the base of the Armed Forces. At the same time, it is a bonding factor for the entire state apparatus, as the National Guard, spread throughout the territory, is seen as one of the mechanisms for integrating the state area.

The specificity of Russia's territorial defence includes protection of the state's critical infrastructure facilities (especially communications), as well as facilities of heightened threat (nuclear power plants, fuel and energy sector facilities), as implemented by the National Guard troops. This also applies to the Guard's exercise of federal state control (supervision) over security activity in Russia and the civilian arms trade (Darczewska 2020: 31).

The war in Ukraine

The National Guard troops also took part in the invasion of Ukraine after 24 February 2022. Their tasks originally included the occupation and clearing of Ukrainian cities and towns, but it turned out that they would also perform combat operations (Mandraud, online).

The Russian National Guard was also involved in the invasion against Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022. However, it was not necessarily used as intended, trained and equipped. In addition to securing the rear and patrolling the occupied cities and towns, as well as repressing Ukrainians who opposed the occupation (as early as March 2022, National Guard soldiers detained approximately four hundred Ukrainians who protested against the Russian presence in the Kherson region (*Over 400 Ukrainians*, online)), the Rosgvardia personnel also took part in the combat. For example, two Rosgvardia units manned the second line of defence near Balaklia in the Kharkiv region during the Ukrainian counter-offensive in September 2022. They were quickly defeated (Hardie, online).

During the revolt of the Wagner Group in June 2023, the Rosgvardia sided loyally with the Kremlin. As columns of rebels led by Yevgeny Prigozhin were marching towards Moscow, Rosgvardia forces took to the streets in an effort to set up roadblocks and establish defensive positions on key roads leading to the capital (Hardie, online). Gen. Viktor Zolotov said officially at the time: "The rebellion was inspired by the West" (Shuster, online).

In June 2023, Gen. Viktor Zolotov said that his formation would receive tanks and other heavy equipment. This appears to be a reaction to the Rosgvardia's experience in Ukraine and during the Wagner Group's revolt (Hardie, online).

In contrast, in September 2023, the US Institute for the Study of War reported that the Guard was likely to recruit Wagner Group's mercenaries. ISW writes, citing the

iStories portal, that some of the Wagner Group's mercenaries, who had been in prison in the past, were said to have been offered service in the Rosgvardia. Admission was to be conditional on passing a security check, as well as providing official pardon documents and contracts signed with the Wagner Group (Serohina, online).

The conflict in Ukraine has shown that even a special selection of personnel does not guarantee full loyalty. From the first days of the war, there were reports of Guardsmen refusing to take part in the war. 115 Russian National Guard soldiers were dismissed from service for refusing to fight in Ukraine. Some of them explained to the court that just before the invasion, their commanders explained to them that they were going, for example, to patrol the streets of Kiev or Kharkiv and not to perform combat tasks (*115 Russian national guard soldiers*, online).

Summary

The Federal National Guard Service has become a key component of the Russian Federation's internal security system. The date of the creation of this formation, which is directly subservient to the president, was not arbitrary, as it coincided with the outbreak of a series of "colour revolutions" and a threat of movements hostile to the Kremlin infiltrating Russia. Both the existing internal troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs and the police formations were subordinated to it. The Rosgvardia, as a formation loyal to Vladimir Putin, has been used to support the police in establishing law and order during the opposition's protests. The legal framework even allows the Federal National Guard to have the troops of the Russian Armed Forces subordinated to it in times of crisis.

The Russian National Guard is also an important element of the territorial defence developed for times of war, thus also forming part of the state's military security system. Several hundred thousand soldiers can significantly support the Armed Forces primarily in securing the rear, counter-insurgency operations, and protecting the critical infrastructure.

There are many indications that the experience of the war in Ukraine and the Prigozhin rebellion will result in a further strengthening of the National Guard as a stabilising factor in Putin's power. The Wagnerian march in particular highlighted the paralysis of other services responsible for public safety, demonstrating the loyal attitude of the Rosgvardia command and the guardsmen themselves.

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