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Putin's Private National Guard

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Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that President-elect Vladimir Putin is poised to undertake the most significant reform Russia has seen in recent years by creating a National Guard from scratch. These special forces, numbering up to 400,000 men, would answer directly to the president and would be charged with protecting the country from internal threats.

As a result, Russia would resemble a classic South American or Middle Eastern dictatorship. Take, for example, Syria, where for decades men from the lower classes have had only two career options — a dead-end job with a state company or joining the troops that guard the president. Ironically, Putin is considering adopting such a system even after the entire world witnessed how the Libyan version of this model failed miserably, while the Syrian version of this model is headed toward a similar demise.

The creation of dedicated security units unconnected to the army or the police — like the infamous Tonton Macoutes under former Haitian President Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier — does not protect citizens from criminals nor external enemies, but protects the leadership from the people. These units are telltale attributes of a dictatorship.

The Putin regime effectively issued a decree granting freedom to the siloviki, as Peter III had

granted certain liberties to the nobility. In freeing the hands of the siloviki, they were allowed to extort, steal and even kill. Paradoxically, the government asked for nothing in return, except for the promise to uphold a sort of gentlemen's agreement: "You are free to rape and pillage as long as you break up anti-government demonstrations."

But when the time came to make good on their obligations, it turned out that marauders made bad warriors. This winter, Moscow police openly told protesters they had detained that, had it not been for recent pay raises, they would not have bothered to turn out for street detail at all.

The same with the army. As long as Putin has been in control, there has been a deliberate reluctance to carry out much-needed military reforms in the belief that the first thing an improved, efficient army might do is rise up against Putin. As a result, the army has remained in the same sad state and is incapable of stripping anyone of anything — much less guarding Putin from angry protesters.

The Federal Security Service can't fulfill this role either. If Putin were to tell FSB officers, whose main focus is their lucrative side businesses, that they should take on the thankless job of dealing with protesters, they would tell Putin to get lost.

Putin created the Nashi youth group to recruit young people from economically depressed towns surrounding Moscow who could be bused into the capital overnight to man pro-government street demonstrations or break up anti-government rallies. But this winter, it became clear that the Nashi youth, whose main interest is drinking and partying at the government's expense, are of little value.

The only way out of the impasse is to create yet another security structure. The ruling elite will continue to control the petrodollars and most of that money will be deposited in overseas bank accounts, but the difference will be that most of the remaining money will be spent on maintaining a National Guard that will recruit young men without chances for a career in the stagnant economy. They will be paid to protect the very people whose corrupt rule has denied them the chance of a career — and has denied Russia the chance for freedom.

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