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Cossacks Start Patrolling Central Moscow

By The Moscow Times

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Renowned for their sword-fighting prowess and notorious for their anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia, the Cossacks are taking on new foes: beggars, drunks and improperly parked cars.

With the approval of city authorities, eight Cossacks clad in traditional fur hats and uniforms patrolled a Moscow train station on Tuesday looking for signs of minor public disturbances.

Cossacks trace their history in Russia back to the 15th century. Serving in the tsarist cavalry, they spearheaded imperial Russia's expansion in exchange for special privileges, including the right to govern their own villages. In the 2010 census, about 650,000 Russians declared themselves Cossacks.

Tuesday's patrol was a test run on whether the group can become an armed and salaried auxiliary police force, with the power of arrest, patrol leader Igor Gulichev said.

He compared his forces to the Texas Rangers, the elite law-enforcement body in the U.S. state.

"They are just like Cossacks, and they work for the government, but they're welcomed with open arms. How come this should be allowed in America, but not in Russia, with our rich Cossack traditions? We're like Chuck Norris!" Gulichev said, in reference to the cult karate-kicking star of the television series "Walker, Texas Ranger."

Gulichev's group, which he said numbers up to 85, has patrolled southwestern Moscow with police approval for the past year, and has brought about 35 arrests. They are unpaid but receive free public transport passes and uniforms. Tuesday's patrol was the first in central Moscow.

Tuesday's modest effort lasted barely more than an hour and yielded few rewards. Without the police supervisor that Russian law requires to oversee volunteer deputies, the Cossacks drove away two elderly beggars, an old woman selling dried wild mushrooms and one unlicensed trading stall before piling into a bus. The stall was back selling socks within hours.

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