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Kremlin Insecurity Threatens to Derail Russia's Police Reform

By Mark Galeotti

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As I write this, the career of Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev whirls in a vortex of rumor and gossip. Has he resigned? Will he? Or are the rumors of his departure wholly groundless? Perhaps by the time this article is published, the situation will have been resolved. If Kolokoltsev does go, though, it is likely to be a worrying sign for Russia's national security.

The rumors first surfaced on the independent television channel Dozhd, then began being circulated through the media. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov all but gave a nod and a wink when he simply vouchsafed knowing nothing about the rumors, without adding even the most half-hearted statements in Kolokoltsev's support. As speculation about his fate — resigning, transferred, dismissed, whatever — continue, their very pressure begin to lever him out of the Interior Ministry. Some have survived such campaigns, but typically they, like Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin, are close to Putin. Kolokoltsev has no such magic protection.

In many ways, that's the point: Kolokoltsev is vulnerable because he is a professional, not

a courtier or a crony. He is a career police officer whose time in office has seen him walk a delicate line between the kind of populism that shores up both public and Kremlin support and a long-term campaign to bring overdue and much-needed reform to the Interior Ministry. Corruption, over-militarization, a reliance on conviction by intimidation, a focus on quotas that encouraged officers to fabricate convictions in the pursuit of promotion — all of these have been identified as serious challenges.

They have new uniforms that look less militaristic, the quota system has been formally abolished, and a re-accreditation process — a purge by any other name — has seen 200,000 police dismissed. But truly reforming the police, especially given resistance in the ranks, is a cultural and generational process; in these terms, Kolokoltsev has only just begun.

Not surprisingly there has not been any major improvement in public opinions of his force. Furthermore, at a time when the Kremlin is perhaps more interested in loyalty and the ability to control the streets rather than cracking down on bribe-takers or deterring burglars, none of this may count for very much.

But how could Kolokoltsev's departure be considered a security threat? The fact of the matter is that the true threats to Russian security are not mythical Ukrainian "fascists" or NATO aggressors, but the temptation of authoritarianism, corruption, a lack of state legitimacy, crime and narcotics.

Of course, it is possible that Kolokoltsev could be replaced by an even more active and effective reformer, but the odds are against this happening. It is striking that the name being nosed around as his successor is recently appointed First Deputy Interior Minister Viktor Zolotov.

Like Kolokoltsev's predecessor Rashid Nurgaliyev, Zolotov is not a cop but a career political policeman. A bodyguard, first for the KGB, then briefly in the private sector, he became the head of Putin's security detail and then, in 2000, of the Presidential Security Service. Zolotov, who is even one of Putin's judo sparring partners, is very much one of the president's trusted henchmen. In 2013 he was unexpectedly moved to the Interior Ministry to command the Interior Troops, to strengthen the Kremlin's direct control over public security forces in a new age of mass protest.

There is no evidence that Zolotov has any particular enthusiasm for Kolokoltsev's reform project. Under his command, the Interior Troops have been going through a continued modernization but remain essentially a Praetorian Guard for the Kremlin. The danger is that as he develops them, they become more attractive as an instrument.

Just as Putin may have thought twice about snatching Crimea, had military reform not given him special forces able to carry off such a fast, surgical operation, so too having more than 150,000 increasingly well-trained and -equipped security troopers might represent quite a temptation. As Ukraine's former President Viktor Yanukovych found, though, using a heavy hand on the street can backfire disastrously.

Secondly, Kolokoltsev is presently especially vulnerable because of the continuing scandal surrounding corruption allegations at the Interior Ministry's economic crime and anti-corruption directorate. Its chief is on trial, his deputy died in custody under perplexing

circumstances, and the regular accounts of the case only attract attention to the problems within the police.

This embarrassment is gleefully encouraged by the Federal Security Service and the Investigative Committee, two agencies with a shared interest in undercutting the Interior Ministry.

Potentially, then, Kolokoltsev's departure, even if to some suitable honorific sinecure, could have several serious implications. It could see the focus of the Interior Ministry shift away from meaningful reform and back toward an emphasis on controlling the street.

In the process, it does nothing meaningful to address such serious political and social challenges as corruption and drug addiction — Russia has 8 million regular users and addicts, and last year's tally of drug-related deaths reached 100,000 — and instead causes greater temptations to use authoritarian methods.

It also empowers more hawkish security agencies and signals that political maneuver by character assassination and targeted accusation works. These, surely, are serious threats to Russia's long-term security and stability.

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