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Russian Activists Ask Putin to Send Troops Into Armenia

By Anna Dolgov

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Valery Permyakov

Online activists have leapt to the defense of a Russian soldier who has reportedly confessed to killing six members of an Armenian family, calling on President Vladimir Putin to "send in the troops" to protect all Russian-speakers in the Transcaucasian country.

The activists, commenting through their social media group "Anti-Maidan — Armenia," declared soldier Valery Permyakov to be "under Russia's protection" and called for the use of force to combat Armenians who want him to face trial in their country.

Of note, the group's name recalls the political protests on Kiev's Maidan Square that led to the overthrow of Ukraine's Moscow-backed administration last February. In the weeks that followed, Russia sent its troops into Crimea — ostensibly to protect Russian-speakers in the region.

"Our president has clearly stated: We shall defend our compatriots everywhere! In every place on the globe," the group wrote on its VKontakte social network page. "And Valera [Permyakov] is no exception."

Thousands of Armenian protesters took to the streets last week, demanding that Russian authorities hand over Permyakov — a soldier at a military base in Gyumri who police say has confessed to killing six people, including a two-year-old girl. A six-month-old boy was also wounded in the attack, which took place last Monday, but he survived.

The "Anti-Maidan — Armenia" group responded to last week's demonstrations by calling the protesters "Nazis" — the same term that Moscow's politicians and state-run media had used to refer to the opposition in Ukraine.

"Putin, send in the troops!" the group said on VKontakte. "All of the Russian-speaking population in Armenia is now in danger!" The group also proclaimed: "Russia is Permyakov, and Permyakov is Russia."

It was not immediately clear whether the group was created for satirical purposes, but the posts drew outrage from opposition Russian politician Boris Nemtsov.

"When the Anti-Maidan pro-Kremlin movement declares Permyakov ... to be 'a prisoner of conscience' what are they counting on?" Nemtsov said on his Facebook page last week. "On the love of the Armenian people? Or on seeing Russians cursed even by the citizens of Armenia who have so far been friendly?"

Nemtsov also suggested that the group was aiming to incite a conflict, while the "Kremlin is silently condoning them."

'Prisoner of Conscience'

Armenia, like Georgia and Ukraine, is among the former Soviet states that had traditionally enjoyed close ties with Russia.

But in recent years, Russia has fought a war against Georgia over its pro-Russian separatist regions, and annexed Crimea from Ukraine under the guise of protecting the peninsula's Russian-speaking population.

The developments have soured Georgia's and Ukraine's relations with Russia, and Armenian lawmakers said last week that the Gyumri killing would likely spark debate about Russia's military presence in the country.

According to a statement posted Sunday on the Kremlin website, Putin has spoken with Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan to express his condolences and offer assurances that the "those responsible would receive the punishment envisaged by law."

Yet there was no direct reference to Permyakov in the Kremlin's statement, and there appears to be some disagreement on the legal issues surrounding his possible handing over to Armenian authorities.

Nemtsov, the opposition politician, cited a 1997 agreement between Moscow and Yerevan,

which seems to indicate that Russian military personnel charged with committing crimes in Armenia should be tried by Armenian courts.

"In cases of crimes and other offenses committed on the territory of the Republic of Armenia by individuals who are members of the Russian military base and their families, the laws of the Republic of Armenia are applied, and its competent organs will take action," the agreement reads, according to the text posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry website.

But the Armenian Prosecutor General's Office said last week that under Russia's Constitution, Russian citizens detained by Russian authorities on suspicion of having committed a crime cannot be handed over to another country, the Interfax news agency reported.

Nemtsov argued that Armenian demonstrators demands — that Russia deliver on the international agreements it had signed — were "perfectly legal."

"But Permyakov has not been handed over, and [he has] even been proclaimed 'a prisoner of conscience,'" he said. "And then we show surprise that everybody around hates us."

The "prisoner of conscience" phrase appears to originate from an earlier post on the "Anti-Maidan — Armenia" group on VKontakte, which used the term to describe the suspected killer, according to a screen-grab posted by Nemtsov.

The group has since toned down its language, and now runs a different caption under the same picture that reads: "Valery Permyakov: Killer or victim?"

Yet it remains defiant in its attempts to blame the Armenian protests on the U.S. while calling for Moscow to respond in order to maintain its hold on the region.

"Accusing a Russian warrior profits only two forces — the U.S. and their subordinate Armenian opposition, which has already managed to put forward demands to close the Russian military base," the group said on its VKontakte page.

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