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Kids in Uniform to March in Pint-Sized Military Parade in Southern Russia

By Anna Dolgov

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A southern Russian city will hold a parade of children in uniform on Thursday to salute World War II veterans in a military show commanded by army officers, the Defense Ministry said.

Participants aged four to 10 will be wearing specially made child-size versions of the uniforms of various branches of Russia's armed forces during the march in Rostov-on-Don, the ministry said in an online statement.

"The parade will be opened by a motorized column of kindergarten machinery, followed by a squadron of the honor guard," the statement issued Wednesday read. "Those will be followed by child units in uniforms of the Ground Forces, the Air Force and the Navy."

About 500 children are expected to participate in what the Defense Ministry called a parade of "child troops."
Similar parades have been held in Rostov-on-Don — a city off the Black Sea near the border with Ukraine — since 2010, the ministry added.

A photo of a past parade released by the Defense Ministry showed young boys and girls dressed in military fatigues riding on kick scooters.

The Thursday parade will be held “under the auspices of” the southern military district commander, Lt. Gen. Alexander Galkin, and will be commanded by the district's Col. Vadim Martya, the Defense Ministry said.

Russia has been increasingly promoting “patriotic” education and military-style events for children, such as summer camps whose instructors included retired military commanders and veterans of the wars in Chechnya and Afghanistan.

Most such activities involved older children and teenagers, but in an echo of Soviet-era militarized “patriotic” education, the trend seems to have been expanding to kids as young as preschoolers, drawing mixed public reaction.

A kindergarten party in St. Petersburg celebrating Defender of the Fatherland Day in February prompted an outcry on the internet, when photos of the event posted online showed small children posing with semi-automatic rifles and grenade launchers.

Organizers claimed that the weapons, brought to the kindergarten by the father of one of the students who is a military serviceman, were not real.

Unlike the celebration in St. Petersburg, the parade in Rostov-on-Don has brought no criticism from the children's parents, the deputy editor-in-chief of local news portal Gorodskoi Reporter (City Reporter), Victoria Nekrasova, was quoted by independent Ekho Moskvy radio early Thursday as saying.

Participation in the Rostov-on-Don parade is voluntary, Nekrasova added, Ekho Moskvy reported.

But many readers of the radio station's website — an audience that tends to be more liberal and opposition-minded than Russia's population in general — expressed disbelief and outrage, accusing the Kremlin of traumatizing young children's minds and raising a generation of aggressors.

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