

Russian Interior Ministry Cuts All Bark, No Bite, Experts Say

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After President Vladimir Putin signed an order this week reducing the Interior Ministry payroll by 10 percent, or about 110,000 jobs, speculation ran rife as to whether the decision would inspire efficiency, or cripple Russian law enforcement.

Efforts to curb the Interior Ministry's bloated payroll date back to 2009, when President Dmitry Medvedev ordered a 20 percent staff reduction. Since then, staff numbers have plunged from 1.28 million to 1.13 million.

And yet with 547 police officers for every 100,000 civilians, Russia still has one of the highest such ratios in the world.

The sheer size of the police force in itself has done little to curtail crime rates, analysts say, noting that it remains to be seen what sort of impact the latest round of cuts will have on the effectiveness of Russian law enforcement forces.

Still, as daunting as the cuts first appear, experts agreed that their practical impact would be minimal.

Nothing Bad

Federal authorities assure Putin's order will not impact the effectiveness of police work in the country, noting the cuts will primarily impact Interior Ministry paper-pushers, as well as vacancies that had not yet been filled.

"Staff reductions ... will not apply to the [police] units working directly with civilians," read a statement released Monday by the Interior Ministry, implying that the cuts won't change much for ordinary people.

The order signed by Putin states that after the cuts have been made there will be just over 1 million staff members left on the ministry's payroll, 835,000 law enforcement officers, administrators and support staff among them.

Notably, more than 40,000 state security guards are expected to face the ax, the Kommersant newspaper reported Tuesday.

Meanwhile, supporters of the cuts have lauded their potential to optimize law enforcement work in Russia.

Championing the cause of a 10 percent payroll reduction earlier this year, Deputy Interior Minister Igor Zubov said such a move could save the government some 111 billion rubles (\$2 billion) annually.

Igor Zotov, a lawmaker and member of State Duma's defense committee, said Tuesday that the Interior Ministry's restrictions were far from unique. "Law enforcement is not the only sphere suffering cuts these days. Incomes are decreasing across the country, and the president even sliced 10 percent off the salaries of lawmakers and ministers," he was cited by Kommersant FM radio as saying Tuesday.

The cuts are simply the result of the evolution of law enforcement technology and could help optimize Russian police work, according to Anton Tsvetkov, who heads the security commission of Russia's Civic Chamber, a state institution that monitors draft legislation and oversees the work of lawmakers and government officials.

"There are new technologies now — modern investigation methods. We [police] need to succeed not with quantity, but with quality," he told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

Tsvetkov added that the Interior Ministry plans to transition some staff members from desk jobs to field work, which would be helpful, he said, as the police patrolling the streets, not their office-based superiors, are the ministry's ranks most in need of support.

And Medvedev's cuts have proved effective, according to recent public opinion polls.

According to a poll by the Public Verdict Foundation, conducted in collaboration with independent pollster the Levada Center earlier this year, the number of Russians satisfied with the work of police officers has grown significantly since Medvedev's reforms took

effect — from 32.8 percent to 46.3 percent.

Trust in police officers has likewise increased from 32.9 percent in 2010 to 47.2 percent in 2015, the poll revealed.

Statistics published by the Prosecutor General's Office show that crime rates have decreased significantly as well, from approximately 2.6 million criminal offenses registered in 2010 to fewer than 2.2 million in 2014.

Nothing Good

But decreased quantities will not necessarily lead to increased quality, Tsvetkov pointed out. "Along with staff reductions, the Interior Ministry should relieve police officers of all the bureaucracy they are burdened with, and of the plethora of menial tasks they do that they're frankly overqualified for. They should constantly work on bolstering the level of professionalism among staff members too," he said, explaining that the amount of paperwork policemen have to do often gets in the way of effective fulfillment of their duties.

Tsvetkov also vowed the Civic Chamber would keep an eye on who the ministry fires once the cuts begin to take effect. "The cuts definitely should not impact police officers who maintain law and order in Russian cities and small towns," he said.

Gennady Gudkov, former deputy head of the State Duma's security committee and a retired KGB colonel, agreed with Tsvetkov that optimization is imperative. "In theory, they are moving in the right direction," he told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

However, he does not believe the freshly announced cuts will achieve this goal. He asserted that rather than aiming to optimize police work, the payroll cuts aimed simply to cut costs.

"I believe they will dismiss those who really do the work, not those sitting at the helm, and not those who serve them coffee and tea," said Gudkov, who has become a prominent opposition activist in recent years.

He argued that previous cuts have always had such an outcome — cushy office jobs and support positions have remained intact while field police officers were laid off.

"After that they can conveniently defend themselves [from complaints about ineffectiveness], saying 'We don't have enough staff, what do you want from us?'," Gudkov explained.

What was a good idea in theory could have been a good idea in reality as well if — in addition to staff reductions — the authorities had improved working conditions and created mechanisms to ensure transparency.

"Our police are completely beyond public control by this point. They're governed by laws they've written for themselves," as, for example, the law regulating the reform in 2011 that was actually written in the Interior Ministry, Gudkov said.

Nothing at All

These cuts will change nothing — the level of bureaucracy will remain the same, said Maria Shklyaruk, coordinator of the Committee of Civil Initiatives foundation's Open Police project, an initiative that promotes transparency within the law enforcement sector.

The ministry claims office jobs will take the biggest hit, and this might be a good thing, as the average police officer must report to so many different people he ends up mired in bureaucracy, she said.

"The existing system entails too many supervisors, and police officers have to issue written reports to each of these supervisors about every step they take," Shklyaruk told The Moscow Times. "Writing reports and answering to superiors ends up taking up more than half their time, leaving them unable to do their jobs effectively," she said.

Realistically, rather than laying off this glut of supervisors, the ministry will likely just disperse them to the fields, where they will enjoy different titles but will essentially continue the same routine of supervising underlings and pushing paper, Shklyaruk said.

"It will leave policemen with the same amount of paperwork, but will create the appearance that management positions have been cut," Shklyaruk said.

Keeping Calm

Police officers themselves appear to be remaining calm for the most part as they await developments.

An officer working for a police department in the Moscow region told The Moscow Times he had heard about the cuts, but that neither he nor any of his unit mates were worried.

Until it becomes clear whether the payroll cuts will be of any consequence to them, they'll continue to do their job as usual, said the officer, who did not want to be named as he is unauthorized to comment on this subject.

"A lot of police officers have no idea what's going to happen," Alexei Lobarev, chairman of the Professional Police Unions Association, told The Moscow Times on Wednesday. "So we are all waiting for the order to determine which departments and units will experience cuts," he said.

Lobarev said that there was no danger the cuts would result in increased crime rates. "It [the reduction] will be carried out step by step, very cautiously," he said, adding that the reduction would apply first and foremost to the positions left unfilled during this year's hiring freeze.

"They [the Interior Ministry] have been prepared for the reduction all along. They have avoided hiring people to replace those who have quit, and these positions will be the first to be scrapped from the payroll," Lobarev said.

In any case, professional unions are on hand to help unemployed police officers find new jobs. "For example, we have agreements with several banks that they would consider former police officers that used to work with people — they are usually very good at client relations,"

Lobarev said.

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