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A Bigger Bludgeon: Putin's Man Put in Charge of New National Guard

By Mikhail Fishman

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Victor Zolotov, head of the new National Guard, has been at Putin's side since the early 1990s.

When it comes to President Vladimir Putin's personal trust, Viktor Zolotov has no peers. Head of Federal Security Guard Service since Putin was elected president for the first time in 2000, their bond actually dates back to the early 1990s. Both worked in St. Petersburg for then-mayor Anatoly Sobchak — Putin as one of his key advisors and Zolotov as his personal bodyguard.

Zolotov was first recruited into KGB structures in the 1970s, hired as a bodyguard by Alexander Korzhakov, Boris Yeltsin's extremely influential personal guard and political aide. Zolotov could even be seen standing alongside Korzhakov and Yeltsin on the famous tank in front of Moscow crowds during the August 1991 failed coup. The Soviet Union collapsed as a result, Yeltsin emerged as the leader of the new Russia and Zolotov was sent to St. Petersburg — to guard Sobchak, and then, Putin.

Now, some 25 years later, Zolotov has become one of the few major players in the state hierarchy. Unlike his mentor Korzhakov, Zolotov has never been an active politician, but has ultimately risen to prominence, says political analyst Nikolai Petrov. From April 5, he holds the rank of minister and has been appointed a member of the National Security Council.

In what looks to be one of the most significant reforms of Russian security and law enforcement since Putin came to power, Zolotov was appointed director and commander in chief on April 5 of a new armed force reporting directly to the president. The new National Guard will be designed, according to Putin's decree, to deliver "public order and fight terrorism and extremism."

Made up of Russia's current interior and security troops, the new National Guard will receive a broad spectrum of rights and tools of legal violence. Instead of various types of special police units of different submission and authority, Zolotov will command a unified interior military force. Its major task will be clamping down on riots and social unrest.

According to an Interfax news agency source, the new force may number as many as 400,000 officers, approximately half the size of the Russian army.

Putin has been especially concerned with domestic order ever since mass protest rallies broke out in Moscow in the winter of 2011. Since them, rumors of such a force have circulated within the establishment. "Apparently, the time has finally come," a source close to the Kremlin told The Moscow Times.

The National Guard has been granted more power than was originally planned, says political consultant Yevgeny Minchenko. Not only does Putin want to have troops to call on in case of riots, it is understood that the National Guard will also act as a counterbalance to the Federal Security Service (FSB), the heir of the KGB. This would explain the unexpected powers given to the National Guard — such as fighting terrorism and organized crime — according to the legislation draft introduced by Putin.

When installing his system of vertical control, Putin never relied on a single special force. In the 2000s, he specifically designed the Federal Drug Control Service as a counterbalance to the FSB. Now, drug control has long since lost its political purpose, and Putin feels it is too dangerous to rely on a single, prevailing, constantly expanding structure, such as the FSB, says Nikolai Petrov.

The National Guard's paramount function is to be an effective fighting fist. It's a calibrated response to the external threat Putin assumes is coming from the West, says Minchenko. It's a signal "that Russia is ready, that it has a bludgeon to fight with."

By creating the National Guard, Putin has shown what he cares about most — protests. And his most trusted man will lead the fight.

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