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Ukrainian Villain Is Now Cracking Heads in Moscow

A police commander whose savagery helped spur the 2013 Ukraine revolution is now practicing his art in central Moscow.

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Colonel Sergei Kusyuk **Screenshot Youtube**

Colonel Sergei Kusyuk was a key villain in Ukraine's revolution of 2013-2014; in fact, he may have set it off through his ham-handed actions. Now, he has shown up in Moscow, once again cracking down on protesters with a vastly disproportionate use of force — but the city is not rising up as Kiev did six years ago.

On the evening of Nov. 29, 2013, Kusyuk was deputy commander of the special forces unit of the Ukrainian police, the Berkut. There had been protests that day in Kiev's Independence Square against President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign a trade and association deal with the European Union. But by nightfall, only a handful of young people remained. They likely

would have soon left, too — a crowd of 300 people clearly wasn't enough to make Yanukovych reconsider. But then, according to Ukrainian prosecutors, the president ordered the remaining protesters dispersed, ostensibly so a large artificial Christmas tree could be set up in the square. Kusyuk carried out the order with needless cruelty: the students got a severe beating. There were bloodied skulls and broken limbs.

The episode was the starting point of much bigger protests, which ended in Yanukovych's overthrow and escape to Russia. I was in Kiev when it seemed the entire city — perhaps as many as 1 million people — took to the streets in anger. Protesters even seized the Kiev mayor's office. It was clear to everyone, including Yanukovych and Russian President Vladimir Putin — who called the Kiev events a "pogrom" — that bigger things were afoot than the spurned EU deal. The protests escalated, and in February, firearms were distributed to the increasingly overtaxed Berkut officers. Dozens of protesters were shot in the revolution's final days, and Kusyuk is now wanted for his alleged role.

But it's not likely that Ukrainian law enforcement will get its hands on Colonel Kusyuk. Along with a number of his Berkut colleagues, he fled to Moscow, where he now serves in a special police unit of Russia's National Guard called the OMON. He acquired Russian citizenship, and even got his old rank back. He was first recognized in his new role at a Moscow protest in 2017.

Embed:

On Saturday, he was out again, commanding a huge riot police force ordered to disperse an unsanctioned protest in central Moscow against the exclusion of opposition candidates from an upcoming city council election. The previous week's unrest set a record with more than 1,300 detentions, as the Kremlin demonstrated it won't tolerate any spontaneous street activity from the so-called "non-system," anti-Putin opposition. Fewer people turned out over the weekend, and it appeared at times they were outnumbered by riot police, many wearing balaclavas under their helmets to avoid identification.

The brutal beatings of non-resisting young people by officers in full riot gear seemed like a replay of Kiev, 2013 — and no wonder, given that Kusyuk was in charge. Around 1,000 people were detained, at least 81 of them minors.

And yet Muscovites didn't rise up in response to the beatings as Kievans had done. Just as the crackdown was taking place, thousands attended two music festivals (one of them hastily organized by the city government to distract the public) and a big soccer game between two hometown teams.

As an emigre who wasn't at the protests, I have no moral right to condemn my native city's residents for indifference. All I can do is point out that what was unacceptable in Ukraine, run by a bungling dictator in late 2013, people will are willing to allow in Russia, run by a more competent one in 2019.

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The reasons for the difference are complex. Moscow is a city overflowing with money; the

unemployment rate there is 1.2 percent compared with almost 5 percent nationwide. That means Muscovites have more to lose than the relatively poorer Kievans did by joining the protests, which can result in jail terms and getting effectively blacklisted for employment. The city council is one of the country's weakest regional legislatures, elections to it usually attract low turnouts, and Muscovites care little about it. A better cause might have drawn more protesters, even in July, when many people are away on vacation.

But a more important reason, I think, is the success of the Putin regime's intimidation tactics, especially in the years since the last big protests, against a 2011 parliamentary election widely seen as stolen. They didn't fully succeed in scaring Putin's most active opponents: They still take to the streets, even though they know many of them will be beaten and/or detained. Yet most residents are inured to the kind of random, disproportionate violence that was so alien and deplorable to the Kievans of 2013. Muscovites just don't get too worked up when a rubber stick comes down on a kid's head: So what, happens all the time. Cops are like that. Can't be helped.

As the events in Kiev illustrated, there is an inherent danger for the state in the sort of brutal crackdown we've seen over the last week: Someone could be accidentally killed or very badly injured, and ordinary people would suddenly get angry and turn out in such numbers that police wouldn't be able to cope. In Moscow, though, I'm not sure even that would make hundreds of thousands of people angry enough to overwhelm the "cosmonauts," as Russian riot troops are sarcastically called because of their spacesuit-like outfits. No wonder only three percent of Russians say they consider the Moscow protests an important event: They're just too small.

Colonel Kusyuk came to the right place. Whatever happens next — and there's clearly a growing lack of patience with the Kremlin among young Russians, not just in Moscow but also in the much more depressed provinces — he has a lot more latitude for his particular way of protecting the public order than he did in his former home country.

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