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Putin Recreates Soviet-Era Political Supervision Over National Guards

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The National Guard, an internal military unit with around 340,000 troops, was created in 2016. **Sergei Fadeichev / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin has created a new post in Russia's National Guard to ensure ideological education and political unity amid questions over the country's return to once-abolished Soviet practices.

The Russian military has gained political influence in both domestic and foreign policy since the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and renewed geopolitical tensions with the West. In 2018, Putin created a "military-patriotic" directorate inside the Russian Armed Forces in an apparent bid to secure the loyalty of Russia's estimated 1 million soldiers.

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Putin signed a decree Monday adding "military and political work" to a list of powers held by the Russian National Guard.

No further details of what that work entails were provided.

“We associate the proposals to create military-political bodies in the troops with the further development of [the troops'] moral and psychological support,” National Guard head Viktor Zolotov said in March, when he first announced the upcoming changes.

Putin created the National Guard, an internal military unit with around 340,000 troops, in 2016.

The Soviet army employed political commissars who taught soldiers the Marxist and Leninist doctrine and made sure they stayed loyal to the ruling Communist Party. The position underwent several name changes after 1918 but continued to act as the Soviet military’s ideological underpinning until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

After Putin resurrected the “military-patriotic” directorate in the Russian army in 2018, observers raised questions whether he was positioning the country toward a gradual return to Soviet practices.

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