



ANALYSIS

PUTIN'S HENCHMEN THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL GUARD IN THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

| LORENZO CRIPPA |

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Cover page photo: A Rosgvardiya officer at the site of a damaged building following a reported drone attack in Moscow, Russia, 30 July 2023. EPA/YURI KOCHETKOV, Scanpix

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Narva mnt. 63/4, 10120 Tallinn, Eesti
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LORENZO CRIPPA

Lorenzo Crippa is a recent graduate of the Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA - Sciences Po), where he completed a Master's degree in International Security, with a specialisation in Russian studies. He also holds a Bachelor's degree in International and Diplomatic Sciences from the University of Trieste. His main research interests include Russia's foreign, security, defence and domestic policy, and NATO-Russia relations. Previously, he was a Security Analysis and Operations intern at the Istanbul-based UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (RBEC), where he closely monitored Russia's war against Ukraine. In the second half of 2021, he was a research intern at the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	armoured personnel carrier
C2	command and control
ChOP	private security companies (<i>chastnoye okhrannoye predpriyatiye</i>)
CIT	Conflict Intelligence Team
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
DRG	sabotage and reconnaissance group (<i>diversionno-razvedyvatel'naya gruppya</i>)
DVKR	Department of Military Counterintelligence (<i>Departament voyennoy kontrrazvedki</i>)
FGUP	Federal State Unitary Enterprise (<i>Federal'noe gosudarstvennoe unitarnoe predpriyate</i>)
FKSN	Federal Anti-Drug Service (<i>Federal'naya sluzhba po kontrolyu za oborotom narkotikov</i>)
FSB	Federal Security Service (<i>Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti</i>)
FSO	Federal Guard Service (<i>Federalnaya sluzhba okhrany</i>)
IMV	infantry mobility vehicle
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
LRR	Licensing Work units (<i>Podrazdeleniya litsenzionno-razreshitel'noy raboty</i>)
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs (<i>Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del</i>)
NPP	nuclear power plant
ODON	Separate Operational Purpose Dzerzhinsky Division (<i>Otdel'naya diviziya operativnogo naznacheniya</i>)
OMON	Special Purpose Mobile Detachments (<i>Otryad mobilny osobogo naznacheniya</i>)
OSN	Special Purpose Detachment (<i>Otryad spetsyalnogo naznacheniya</i>)
OVO	Extradepartmental Security units (<i>Vnevedomstvennaya okhrana</i>)
PS	Border Service (<i>Pogranichnaya sluzhba</i>)
RKhBZ	Troops of Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defence (<i>Voyska radiatsioonnoy, khimicheskoy i biologicheskoy zashchity</i>)
SBP	Presidential Security Service (<i>Sluzhba bezopasnosti prezidenta</i>)
SOBR	Special Rapid Response Detachments (<i>Spetsial'nyy otriad bystrogo reagirovaniya</i>)
TOG	Temporary Operational Group
TsSN	Special Purpose Centre (<i>Tsentr spetsyalnogo naznacheniya</i>)
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UVO	Departmental Security Directorate (<i>Upravlenie vedomstvennoy okhrany</i>)
VDV	Russian Airborne Forces (<i>Vozdushno-desantnye voyska</i>)
VKS	Aerospace Forces (<i>Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily</i>)
VV	MVD's Internal Troops (<i>Vnutrennie voyska</i>)

stability and the war against Ukraine, the National Guard has at least momentarily strengthened its standing within Russia. In this sense, the case of the National Guard is illustrative of the general dynamics characterising Russian security agencies, constantly engaged in “a carnivorous, cannibalistic struggle with each other” for resources, influence, or even mere survival, in which demonstrating relevance and alignment with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s policies is paramount.²

INTRODUCTION

“We do not have a border with Ukraine. It is the border of the Americans because they are the masters in that country!” General Viktor Zolotov, Head of the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*), said during Russia’s Security Council meeting in late February 2022, just three days before the beginning of Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹ Talking for a little over a minute, Zolotov was the last person to take the floor among the high officials gathered, almost reflecting the limited attention that his service receives outside Russia compared to other security agencies.

Yet, this does not make the National Guard’s role in Russia’s defence and security thinking any less significant. As Zolotov’s men poured into Ukraine alongside Moscow’s regular troops on 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s key assumptions about the war became evident: the so-called “special military operation” had to result in Ukraine’s rapid capitulation, with the Russian National Guard performing key occupation duties and quelling any Ukrainian protests against the new authorities. As this plan failed, National Guard units would suddenly find themselves in a conventional war they had neither the training nor the equipment to fight.

Since then, *Rosgvardiya* has taken on many roles, from ensuring Russia’s control over the occupied territories in Ukraine to shielding the regime from potential domestic unrest. Willing to be a key instrument to advance Putin’s priority objectives, most notably internal

Willing to be a key instrument to advance Putin’s priority objectives, Rosgvardiya has strengthened its standing within Russia

This paper aims to highlight the role that the National Guard has played in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the war’s impact on the service. First, it will provide a short background on the National Guard, its creation, and its capabilities. Second, it will offer an overview of the main functions that the service has performed in the war against Ukraine, from the early days of February 2022 onwards. Third, it will outline how the war has to some extent made the National Guard a rising fighting force inside Russia, both from a combat and institutional standpoint, while highlighting several issues that persist and could hinder a more systemic growth of the service.

1. WHAT IS ROSGVARDIYA? A SHORT BACKGROUND

One of Russia’s youngest security agencies, the Russian National Guard, was formed in 2016 out of units transferred from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del*, MVD). These included notably the MVD’s Internal Troops (*Vnutrennie voyska*, VV, a counterinsurgency military force which saw action fighting rebel groups in the Northern Caucasus), as well as much of the MVD’s police special units, namely the Special Rapid Response Detachments (*Spetsial’nyy otriad*

¹ Current Time, “[Путин провел заседание Совбеза | 21.2.22](#) [Putin holds a Security Council Meeting, 21.2.2022],” YouTube, 21 February 2022.

² Mark Galeotti, “[The Silovik-Industrial Complex: Russia’s National Guard as Coercive, Political, Economic and Cultural Force](#),” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 29:1 (February 2021): 4.

bystrogo reagirovanniya, SOBR, a SWAT-style force designed primarily to fight organised criminal groups) and the Special Purpose Mobile Detachments (*Otryad mobilny osobogo naznacheniya*, OMON, a public security force with riot police functions). The service inherited several other MVD bodies, including the so-called Extradepartmental Security units (*Vnevedomstvennaya okhrana*, OVO) and the Federal State Unitary Enterprise “Okhrana” (*Federal’noe gosudarstvennoe unitarnoe predpriyatie*, FGUP), both offering paid security services to public and private entities alike.³

The appearance of the National Guard was largely motivated by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s concerns over internal instability

The appearance of the National Guard was largely motivated by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s concerns over internal instability. With the 2016 reform, Putin brought to life an over-200 000-strong independent security force which can be deployed to quell domestic unrest and prevent violent regime change. Most importantly, unlike the MVD, whose willingness to shield the regime unconditionally was in question, the National Guard reports directly to the president, ensuring greater Kremlin control in times of crisis. This was seen as crucial to prevent so-called “colour revolutions” inside Russia, perceived by the Russian leadership as western plots for regime change rather than genuine expressions of public dissatisfaction. The task to lead such a key force has been entrusted to General Viktor Zolotov, a man considered very loyal to Putin

³ The service also inherited the MVD’s so-called Licensing Work units (*podrazdeleniya litsenziionno-razreshitel’noy raboty*, LRR), which are police units in charge of exercising state supervision over firearms trade, private security companies, and private detective activities. Furthermore, Rosgvardiya received the MVD’s aviation units as well as Operational Response Forces and Aviation Special Purpose Centre, comprising the elite SOBR “Rys” detachment which has also seen action in Ukraine, see: “[Полномочия, задачи, функции подразделений ЛРР](#) [Powers, tasks, functions of LRR units],” Службы войск национальной гвардии российской федерации по ханты-мансийскому автономному округу – ЮГРЕ [Services of the National Guard troops of the Russian Federation in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – YUGRE], accessed in December 2022. The main difference between the two is that OVO policemen have the status of law enforcement agents, giving them more power; Okhrana is essentially Rosgvardiya’s own private security company, with its employees facing more restrictions in the exercise of their duties.

who previously led the Presidential Security Service (*Sluzhba bezopasnosti prezidenta*, SBP), a unit of the Federal Guard Service (*Federalnaya sluzhba okhrany*, FSO) in charge of protecting the president. In Soviet times, Zolotov worked for the FSO’s predecessor, the KGB’s 9th Directorate.⁴

On top of public order and security duties, the National Guard performs several other functions, listed in Article 2 of the 2016 Federal Law “On the National Guard Troops.”⁵ These include protecting key administrative and infrastructure facilities, including some that are subject to mandatory Rosgvardiya protection according to a list redacted by the government, participating in the fight against terrorism, contributing to Russia’s territorial defence, and supporting the Federal Security Service (*Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB) in border protection. The service also inherited the MVD’s state oversight responsibilities over firearms trade, private security companies (*chastnoye okhrannoye predpriyatiye*, ChOP), and private detective activities.⁶

⁴ “[Золотов, Виктор Васильевич](#) [Zolotov, Viktor Vasilyevich],” TASS, accessed on 2 February 2023.

⁵ “[Статья 2. Задачи войск национальной гвардии](#) [Article 2. Tasks of the National Guard troops],” in Федеральный закон от 3 июля 2016 г. N 226-ФЗ “О войсках национальной гвардии Российской Федерации” (с изменениями и дополнениями) [Federal Law of July 3, 2016 N 226-FZ “On the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation” (as amended and supplemented)] via Garant, accessed in March 2024.

⁶ This entails issuing gun ownership licences to private citizens and authorisations to operate for private security companies. When it comes to the private security market, the National Guard is, therefore, not just a key commercial actor offering paid security service with its OVO units and FGUP “Okhrana” but also the market’s main regulator, thus enjoying a particularly advantageous position, see: “[Главное управление государственного контроля и лицензионно-разрешительной работы Федеральной службы войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации](#) [Main Directorate of State Control and Licensing and Permitting of the Federal Service of the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation],” Федеральная Служба Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации [Federal Service of the National Guard of the Russian Federation], accessed on 26 February 2023.

Rosgvardiya's Functions According to Russian Legislation

Article 2 of Federal Law “On the National Guard Troops” lists Rosgvardiya’s tasks, which currently include:

- 1) participation in maintaining public order and ensuring public security;
- 2) protection of important state facilities, special cargo, and communications infrastructure;
- 3) participation in the fight against terrorism and extremism;
- 4) participation in ensuring states of emergency, martial law, and legal regime of counter-terrorism operations;
- 5) participation in the territorial defence of the Russian Federation;
- 6) providing assistance to the border authorities of the Federal Security Service in protecting the state border of the Russian Federation;
- 7) federal state control over the field of arms trafficking, private security and private detective activities, as well as over ensuring the security of fuel and energy complex facilities, over the activities of departmental security (*vedomstvennaya okhrana*) units;
- 8) protection of particularly important and sensitive infrastructure objects, objects subject to mandatory protection from National Guard troops, in accordance with the list approved by the Government of the Russian Federation;
- 9) ensuring, by the decision of the President of the Russian Federation, the security of senior officials of the subjects of the Russian Federation and other persons.⁷

To perform these tasks, the National Guard possesses a wide range of capabilities. Organised in eight districts across the Russian territory, the National Guard is effectively both a military and police service, with a part of its servicemen having the status of military personnel (*voennosluzhaschyi*) — namely those from units that previously composed the MVD’s Internal Troops — while other units

⁷ Government of Russia, [Федеральный закон от 3 июля 2016 г. N 226-ФЗ “О войсках национальной гвардии Российской Федерации” \(с изменениями и дополнениями\)](#) [Federal Law “On the National Guard Troops”], N 226-FZ (Moscow: Government, 3 July 2016), Article 2.

have police ranks — including OMON, SOBR, and OVO.⁸ The service fields a number of light utility cars and infantry mobility vehicles (IMVs) — mostly variants of Ural, UAZ, and Kamaz cars but also the “Tigr” and “Patrul A” IMVs — as well as armoured personnel carriers (APCs) including variants of the BTR-70 and BTR-80. The National Guard also possesses limited artillery capabilities, mostly comprising various mortars and the towed 122mm D-30 howitzer (reportedly, the service’s highest calibre gun), as well as several aviation assets,⁹ including Il-76 transport aircraft, combat and transport helicopters such as the Mi-8, Mi-24, and Mi-26, and reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).¹⁰ Rosgvardiya’s arsenal also includes some naval assets, from patrol boats to small landing craft.¹¹

Unlike the United States National Guard, Rosgvardiya is not a reserve force for the Armed Forces and is fully independent from the regular military. This means that in wartime, Rosgvardiya is mostly expected to ensure the security of the Russian rear rather than engage in conventional warfare, lacking tanks, heavy artillery, and the relevant training. However, as Russia began its full-scale assault against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the National Guard soon found itself in frontline combat as a result of the Kremlin’s ill-conceived operation.

⁸ The districts are: Central District, Northwestern District, North Caucasian District, Volga District, Ural District, Siberian District, Eastern District, Southern District, see: [“Геральдические Знаки Округов Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации](#) [Heraldic Insignia of the Districts of the National Guard of the Russian Federation],” Федеральная Служба Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации [Federal Service of the National Guard of the Russian Federation], accessed 4 February 2023.

⁹ Rosgvardiya’s aviation has seen action in Ukraine, being used in transport, evacuation, as well as combat roles, see: [“Авиация Центрального округа Росгвардии с начала года более 100 раз летала в зону СВО](#) [Since the beginning of the year, aviation from the central district of Rosgvardiya has flown more than 100 times to the special military operation zone],” TASS, 8 June 2023; [“Военкор «Известий» показал работу авиации Росгвардии в зоне СВО](#) [Izvestiya’s military correspondent showed the work of Rosgvardiya’s aviation in the special military operation zone],” *Izvestiya*, 24 November 2022.

¹⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies, [“Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia,”](#) *The Military Balance* Volume 123, Issue 1 (February 2023): 197; [“Авиация Войск Национальной Гвардии](#) [Aviation of the National Guard Troops],” Федеральная Служба Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации [Federal Service of the National Guard of the Russian Federation], accessed on 27 January 2023.

¹¹ See Section 3.2.

2. THE DISASTROUS EARLY DAYS OF THE INVASION

The first evidence of Rosgvardiya's deployment near Ukraine appeared in late January 2022, when the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), a Russian investigation group on the Russian military, analysed videos showing an unusual movement of Rosgvardiya vehicles towards the border.¹² As in the case of the regular Armed Forces, reports suggest that few Rosgvardiya fighters were aware of their imminent deployment to Ukraine days before the invasion.¹³

In this context, on 24 February 2022, Rosgvardiya units participated in the initial invasion force against Ukraine, pouring into the country from several directions. Rosgvardiya committed a set of forces, including elements from the National Guard's military units and police *spetsnaz* SOBR and OMON. Among them were also Chechen *Kadyrovtsy* forces, which are officially part of Rosgvardiya despite de facto responding to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.¹⁴

Once in Ukraine, their likely objectives were to seize key government and infrastructure facilities, eliminate local Ukrainian leaders, clear pockets of resistance behind Russian lines, and ensure public order in the occupied territories, while closely interacting with other military and security forces. In at least one documented case, as observed by American

Russia defence expert Dara Massicot, one Russian Airborne Forces' (*Vozdushno-desantnye voyska*, VDV) Battle Tactical Group in the Kyiv region travelled with Rosgvardiya's SOBR and OMON detachments at the leading edge, possibly with responsibility for eliminating Ukrainian local authorities.¹⁵ According to some sources, Rosgvardiya detachments were also assigned to FSB's Temporary Operational Groups (TOGs, tasked with coordinating occupation duties) to maintain public order and eliminate high-value targets.¹⁶

Testifying to the importance of capturing Ukraine's capital in Russian planning, some of Rosgvardiya's most elite units were deployed in the Kyiv region, including the Separate Operational Purpose Dzerzhinsky Division (*Otdel'naya diviziya operativnogo naznacheniya*, ODON). Based in Balashikha, in the Moscow region, and under the direct control of Rosgvardiya Head Viktor Zolotov, ODON is a rapid response unit comprising *spetsnaz* elements such as the 604th Special Purpose Centre "Vityaz" (*Tsentr spetsyalnogo naznacheniya*, TsSN), which participated in fighting in the northern outskirts of Kyiv and their subsequent occupation.¹⁷ Marking "Vityaz's" prominent role in the invasion, its

¹² Conflict Intelligence Team, "[Появились первые свидетельства переброски сил Росгвардии](#), [The first evidence of Rosgvardiya forces' deployment has appeared]," *Medium*, 2 February 2022.

¹³ "[«Охрана улиц Киева» и «зачистка»: сибирские росгвардейцы рассказали следствию о своих задачах в Украине](#) [Guarding the streets of Kyiv and clearing: Siberian Rosgvardiya members told investigators about their tasks in Ukraine]," *Tayga.info*, 23 May 2022.

¹⁴ Rosgvardiya's *Kadyrovtsy* are not officially a separate unit type but exist mostly as military units of the National Guard or police SOBR and OMON. Among them are the 141st Special Regiment "Kadyrov," the 249th Separate Special Motorised Battalion "South" of the 46th Separate Operational Purpose Brigade, as well as OMON "Akhmat-Grozny" and SOBR "Akhmat." *Kadyrovtsy* units were reportedly deployed in the Kyiv region, the eastern city of Mariupol, which was destroyed by Russian troops, as well as several other locations in Ukraine. Sam Cranny-Evans, "[The Chechens: Putin's Loyal Foot Soldiers](#)," *RUSI*, 4 November 2022.

¹⁵ Dara Massicot (@MassDara), "[One VDV BTG traveled with OMON+ SOBR attachments \(some have SWAT-like capabilities\) at the leading edge, perhaps to neutralize local Ukrainian leaders/authorities](#)," Twitter, 19 December 2022.

¹⁶ Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, [Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023](#) (RUSI, March 2023), 20.

¹⁷ "[Структура Федеральной Службы Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации](#) [Structure of the Federal Service of the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation]," Федеральная Служба Войск Национальной Гвардии Российской Федерации [Federal Service of the National Guard of the Russian Federation], accessed on 24 January 2022. Overall, in the early phases of the war at least seven "Vityaz" fighters were reportedly killed in action, likely in the Kyiv region. The actual number is probably higher, see: Mozhem Obyasnit (@mozhemobyasnit), "[В украинской войне потери несет даже элита Росгвардии — «красные береты»](#)" [in the Ukrainian war even Rosgvardiya's elite - the "Maroon Berets" - is suffering losses]," Telegram, 15 March 2022.

commander, Alexander Beloglazov, was later awarded Russia's highest honorary title "Hero of the Russian Federation" for his service in Ukraine.¹⁸

"Vityaz" In the Kyiv Region in The Early Days of War

Rosgvardiya's ODon unit — and, in particular, its 604th Special Purpose Centre "Vityaz" — fought in the Kyiv region in the very first days of the war.

First of all, there is evidence that "Vityaz" participated in the battle of Hostomel, likely as part of the ground troops supposed to link up with Russian VDV forces at Hostomel's Antonov Airport on the first day of the invasion (which, however, did not occur until 25 February).¹⁹ According to Russian state media, Rosgvardiya's units reached Hostomel a day after crossing the border into Ukraine, which would be consistent with the timeline of the Russian ground troops' actual advance.²⁰ ODon fighters likely occupied the Antonov airport after it eventually fell under Russian control in late February 2022, with two servicemen from this unit being reportedly killed there between 26-27 February 2022.²¹ At least one (and likely both) of them served specifically in "Vityaz."²² Local news later reported that in early March,

another "Vityaz" fighter had been killed at an unnamed airport near Kyiv, likely Hostomel.²³

Second, as further evidence of Vityaz's role in the early phases of the war, in March 2022, Ukraine's General Staff reported that the unit was part of a force intended for the assault on the Ukrainian capital, along with other Rosgvardiya forces such as Chechen 141st Special Motorised Regiment "North."²⁴ According to a Reuters investigation, "Vityaz" was also among the units occupying the town of Bucha, where summary executions of Ukrainian civilians by Russian troops took place. Reportedly, the Chechen OMON "Akhmat-Grozny" detachment also operated there.²⁵

Although primarily conceived as a rear security force and intended to trail behind advancing Russian regular troops, Rosgvardiya units quickly found themselves in frontline combat as Russia failed to achieve a rapid victory and chaos ensued, leading to disastrous losses within the service.²⁶ In some cases, as a result of limited planning flexibility, lack of effective coordination among Russian forces, and a severe underestimation of Ukraine's will to fight, Rosgvardiya elements ended up advancing ahead of Russian Army units and tried to secure strategic targets independently,

¹⁸ As of March 2023, 11 Rosgvardiya fighters have been awarded the "Hero of the Russian Federation" title since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, see: "[Путин присвоил звание Героя России 11 росгвардейцам](#) [Putin has awarded the Hero of Russia title to 11 Rosgvardiya members]," *RBK*, 27 March 2023.

¹⁹ Liam Collins et al, "[The Battle Of Hostomel Airport: A Key Moment In Russia's Defeat In Kyiv](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 10 August 2023.

²⁰ "[Росгвардеец сообщил о гибели бойцов ВСУ, оборонявших с россиянами аэродром в Гостомеле](#). [A Rosgvardiya fighter reported the death of Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers defending the airfield in Hostomel with the Russians]," *TASS*, 25 June 2022.

²¹ Marina Rudoy, "[Смерть Ефрейтора: Футболист Стал Спецназовцем И Погиб, Спасая Командира](#) [Death of a corporal: a footballer became a special forces fighter and died saving the commander]," *Tsargrad*, 17 October 2022; Anastasiya Yakupova "[«Привезли грузом 200 два командира». В спецоперации на Украине погиб сержант Росгвардии с Урала](#) ["Two commanders brought him as Cargo 200." A Rosgvardiya sergeant from the Urals died in the special operation in Ukraine]," *Yekaterinburg Onlayn E1.RU*, 14 March 2022.

²² A. Yakupova, "Two commanders brought him as Cargo 200."

²³ "[Никольчанин Михаил Беляков героически погиб под минометной атакой противника, обороняя аэродром в пригороде Киева](#) [Mikhail Belyakov, from Nikolsk, died heroically under an enemy mortar attack while defending an airfield in the suburbs of Kyiv]," *Penza Post*, 11 March 2022.

²⁴ General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "[Operational information on 24.00, 07.03.2022 regarding the Russian invasion](#)," Facebook, 7 March 2022.

²⁵ Mari Saito, "[Love letter, ID card point to Russian units that terrorised Bucha](#)," *Reuters*, 5 May 2022; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Killings of civilians: summary executions and attacks on individual civilians in Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions in the context of the Russian Federation's armed attack against Ukraine](#) (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, December 2022), 8.

²⁶ For instance, according to reported Russian planning in the Kharkiv region, Rosgvardiya units were supposed to be committed only as a fifth echelon force. Pavel Vasilyev, "[«Мы по полям бродили несколько суток». В первые дни вторжения в Украину сотни росгвардейцев отказались воевать и вернулись — и теперь обжалуют свое увольнение в суде](#) ["We wandered through the fields for several days." In the first days of the invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of Rosgvardiya members refused to fight and returned — and are now appealing their dismissal in court]," *Mediazona*, 8 June 2022.

with a catastrophic outcome. On 25 February, for instance, a detachment of OMON and SOBR forces, reportedly from the Kemerovo region (Siberia), attempted to drive into Kyiv ahead of Russia's regular units, moving on

Rosgvardiya units quickly found themselves in frontline combat as Russia failed to achieve a rapid victory and chaos ensued, leading to disastrous losses within the service

light transport vehicles.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, their column was ambushed and destroyed by Ukrainian defences while crossing a bridge over the Irpin River, near Hostomel, as shown by a video published later that day.²⁸ More such cases would be reported elsewhere. Videos posted between late February and early March, for instance, showed destroyed Rosgvardiya columns on a key road to Kharkiv.²⁹ Among the units involved were OMON and SOBR detachments from the Vladimir region (western Russia), some reportedly travelling with typical riot control equipment such as riot shields and helmets.³⁰

What was meant to be a little more than a domestic public order and counter-insurgency operation was rapidly turning into a disaster for Rosgvardiya, raising grievances among the service's

members.³¹ For example, several hundred fighters from Rosgvardiya's 121st Operational Purpose Regiment (military unit number 3723 based in Kabardino-Balkaria, Southern Russia, part of the 49th Separate Operational Purpose Brigade) decided to leave Ukraine after suffering heavy losses in the Kharkiv region and were subsequently fired.³² Some have also speculated that Viktor Zolotov, Rosgvardiya head, was particularly unhappy with the way his forces had been used in Ukraine. His statement on 13 March 2022, when he declared that Russia's operation was not going "as fast as desired," was seen by some as an expression of this dissatisfaction.³³ Although it is impossible to know the exact political dynamics inside the Kremlin, the heavy losses seem to have had a remarkably demoralising effect within Rosgvardiya.³⁴

It is worth mentioning that not all of Rosgvardiya's early operations were a complete failure. As the Russian Army advanced more rapidly in the south, so did Rosgvardiya. Although heavy losses were also reported in

Rosgvardiya units contributed to establishing occupation regimes, quelling Ukrainian protests across different cities, and securing two Ukrainian nuclear plants

these areas, Rosgvardiya units contributed to establishing Russian occupation regimes and quelling Ukrainian protests across different

²⁷ Conflict Intelligence Team, "[Странная попытка прорыва российских омоновцев и собровцев в Киев](#) [A strange attempt by Russian OMON And SOBR forces to break through to Kyiv]," *Medium*, 26 February 2022; Lilia Rahutska, "[Горіла колона кемеровського СОБРу: у мережу потрапило відео бою на мосту через річку Ірпінь 25 лютого](#) [A column of the Kemerovo SOBR burned: a video of the fight on the bridge over the Irpin River on February 25 appeared online]," *Obozrevatel*, 10 December 2022.

²⁸ The bridge in question connects Hostomel to Kyiv and is part of road E373. "[Hostomel-Kyiv bridge location](#)," Google Maps, accessed in February 2024; Conflict Intelligence Team, "A Strange Attempt."

²⁹ "[В окрестностях Харькова уничтожена целая колонна Росгвардии: видео](#) [An entire Rosgvardiya column was destroyed in the vicinity of Kharkiv: Video]," *TSN*, 26 February 2022; Ilya Kosygin, "[Атака Харькова на автозаках. В Украине погибли как минимум четверо старших офицеров владимирского СОБРа](#) [Attacking Kharkiv on paddy wagons. At least four senior officers of the Vladimir SOBR were killed in Ukraine]," *Mediazona*, 22 March 2022.

³⁰ Kosygin, "Attacking Kharkiv on paddy wagons."

³¹ For example, see: Vasilyev, "We Wandered Through The Fields For Several Days;" "[На Кубани уволили 12 сотрудников Нацгвардии из-за отказа отправиться воевать в Украину](#) [In Kuban, 12 National Guard employees were fired due to their refusal to go to fight in Ukraine]," *Mediazona*, 24 March 2022.

³² Vasilyev, "We wandered through the fields for several days."

³³ Yevgenia Voropaeva, "[Золотов объяснил, почему операция на Украине идет «не так быстро»](#) [Zolotov explained why the operation in Ukraine is "not going so fast"]," *RBK*, 13 March 2022.

³⁴ At the same time, in March 2022, one of Zolotov's Deputies, Roman Gavrilo, was reportedly fired and detained. Although the reasons behind his dismissal remain unclear, they further highlight the significant unsettlement caused by the war's early days on the National Guard. Christo Grozev, @christogrozev, "[Three independent sources report that the deputy chief of Russia's Rosgvardiya Gen. Roman Gavrilo has been detained by FSB](#)", Twitter, 17 March 2022; Sergei Sergeev, "[Зачистил и ушел](#) [He cleansed and left]," *Kommersant*, 17 March 2022.

cities, including Kherson.³⁵ Rosgvardiya also played a prominent role in securing the two Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) that fell into Russian hands, the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia NPPs.

3. THE NATIONAL GUARD'S KEY FUNCTIONS AS THE WAR CONTINUES

After the initial plan of a rapid victory over Ukraine failed, Rosgvardiya units have continued to serve in the war carrying out a variety of functions. This has included rather typical National Guard duties, such as repressing Ukrainian protests in occupied territories, ensuring rear security for regular Russian units, and protecting key infrastructure from potential sabotage, but also atypical roles such as participating in frontline combat operations.

A general description of Rosgvardiya's various roles as the war progressed came from Zolotov himself in August 2022. That month, while meeting with Putin, he stated that in Ukraine the National Guard was "accomplishing a wide range of objectives to maintain law, order and security, and to resume peaceful life" in the occupied territories.³⁶ The National Guard was "directly involved in combat operations, namely, reconnaissance and search-and-destroy missions, ambushes, locating and eliminating the enemy's sabotage and reconnaissance teams, sabotage and terrorist groups, as well as locating arms caches and demining."³⁷ Other tasks mentioned by Zolotov included pinpointing enemy targets and destroying them, using Rosgvardiya's own artillery or contacting "the Defence Ministry if the range and power of artillery systems at our disposal are not enough,"

³⁵ "Понадобилось время привыкнуть к мысли, что город не выстоял" ["It took time to get used to the idea that the city did not hold"], *Meduza*, 26 April 2022.

³⁶ President of Russia, "Meeting with Director of the Federal Service of National Guard Troops Viktor Zolotov," Kremlin.ru, 30 August 2022.

³⁷ President of Russia, "Meeting with Director of the Federal Service of National Guard Troops."

patrolling critical state facilities, infrastructure facilities, and communications infrastructure, escorting shipments and convoys, and providing medical services to the local population.³⁸

The bottom line of Rosgvardiya's role in the war is manpower, which has allowed Russian regular units to focus more on purely combat duties

The bottom line of Rosgvardiya's role in the war is manpower. With its participation, Rosgvardiya has effectively freed Russian regular units from performing the tasks described above and allowed them to focus more on purely combat duties. This function of the National Guard in wartime had earlier been outlined in theory by some analysts: in 2018, Zdzisław Śliwa of the Baltic Defence College wrote that Rosgvardiya's "contribution to the territorial defence of the Russian Federation would significantly expand overall Russian combat power, as it would release the armed forces from such duties, allowing units to be used for pure operational tasks."³⁹ The next section will discuss the National Guard's roles throughout the war in more detail.

3.1. A LIGHT INFANTRY ROLE?

Rosgvardiya has assumed roles that do not necessarily clearly fall under its statutory tasks, and for which it is neither trained nor possesses

Rosgvardiya has assumed roles that do not necessarily clearly fall under its statutory tasks, and for which it is neither trained nor possesses the necessary capabilities

the necessary capabilities. This was seen since the early days of the war when Rosgvardiya forces apparently tried to break through Ukrainian defences. Some of these tasks included participating in frontline combat in a

³⁸ President of Russia, "Meeting with Director of the Federal Service of National Guard Troops."

³⁹ Zdzisław Śliwa, *The Russian National Guard: A Warning or a Message?* (National Defence Academy of Latvia, Centre for Security and Strategic Research, 2018), 12.

light infantry role and contributing to manning parts of Russian defensive lines as Russia battled with a critical manpower shortage.⁴⁰

However, this use of Rosgvardiya units as a stopgap solution for the lack of regular Russian manpower would later come back to bite the Russians. In early September 2022, Ukrainian forces launched a significant offensive operation towards the occupied town of Balakliya, in the Kharkiv region. Lacking manpower, Russia had manned this frontline section with mobilised personnel from the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), accompanying elements of the Baltic Fleet's depleted 11th Army Corps, with Rosgvardiya units reportedly acting as a second echelon force,⁴¹ including SOBR and OMON units and the 126th Regiment (based in Nazran, Ingushetia, also part of the National Guard's above-mentioned 49th Brigade).⁴² As these forces were incapable of withstanding a large mechanised attack, Ukrainian forces rapidly broke through Russian defensive lines and, in a matter of days, liberated most of the Kharkiv region, including the key town of Izyum. A disaster for Russia's ambitions to

put pressure on the Donbas from the north, the Kharkiv breakthrough eventually led the Kremlin to the conviction that the Russian war effort could not continue short of mobilisation.

The service's occasional role as a de facto surrogate of Russian regular units has not seen any corresponding adjustments to Russian legislation on the National Guard, which suggests that its use as a frontline combat force

The service's occasional role as a de facto surrogate of Russian regular units has not seen any corresponding adjustments to Russian legislation

is not to become the new rule in future Russian operations. Instead, recent legal changes to the Federal Law "On the National Guard Troops" have further enhanced Rosgvardiya's rear security role. For instance, in the summer of 2022, an amendment added demining and destruction of explosive devices to the list of Rosgvardiya's powers (Article 8), with the sponsors of the bill in the Russian parliament arguing that the change was needed given that the National Guard was effectively already conducting demining in Ukraine's occupied territories.⁴³

Quite on the contrary, Rosgvardiya's participation in frontline combat has seemingly decreased since late 2022, with the service now likely focusing mainly on rear security and occupation duties. This seems to be corroborated by the number of reported deaths among Rosgvardiya's servicemen throughout the war, which saw a peak at the beginning of the full-scale invasion and later declined gradually, increasing moderately during summer 2022 and then being consistently low from November 2022 onwards (see Figure 1).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "[Not built for purpose: the Russian military's ill-fated force design](#)," *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2022.

⁴¹ Michael Kofman and Rob Lee, "[How the Battle for the Donbas Shaped Ukraine's Success](#)," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 23 December 2022.

⁴² The SOBR units involved reportedly included SOBR "Omega" from Samara Oblast and SOBR "Tolpar" from Bashkortostan, see: "[«Мы выжили! Русские, вперёд!»: Росгвардия подтвердила, что СОБР Самары вышел из осаждённой Балаклеи без потерь](#) ["We survived! Russians, let's go!": Rosgvardiya confirmed that the Samara SOBR left the besieged Balakliya without losses]," *Bloknat Samara*, 11 September 2022; Rob Lee (@RALee85), "[Vladlen Tatarsky says he trusts the info from the Starshe Eddy and Zapiski Veteran channels](#)," Twitter, 7 September 2022. The presence of the 126th Regiment emerges from open source reports of deaths among the unit's servicemen in Balakliya in early September, as well as local news and Russian military documents retrieved and published by Reuters, see: "[Груз-200: список убитых в Украине военных с Северного Кавказа и Юга России](#) [Cargo-200: list of military personnel killed in Ukraine from the North Caucasus and Southern Russia]," *Radio Svoboda Kavkaz. Realiy*, N 1180-1181-1182-1192-4898, consulted in January 2024; Russian military documents, "[A diagram showing the units and formations under the command of the Balakliya military force](#)," *Reuters*, 26 October 2022, 3; Mari Saito, Maria Tsvetkova, and Anton Zverev, "[Abandoned Russian base holds secrets of retreat in Ukraine](#)," *Reuters*, 26 October 2022; "[«Армия и ЧВК уехали, только мы там остались»: ингушский боец – о наступлении ВСУ](#) ["The army and PMC left, only we remained there": Ingush fighter – about the offensive of the Armed Forces of Ukraine]," *Fortanga.org*, 12 September 2022.

⁴³ State Duma and Federation Council (Russia), "[Федеральный закон от 14 июля 2022 г. N 351-ФЗ "О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации"](#), N 351-FZ (Moscow: State Duma and Federation Council, 14 July 2022), Article 5; State Duma (Russia), "[Росгвардия и МЧС России получат новые полномочия по разминированию](#) [Rosgvardiya and the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Russia will receive new powers for demining]," *Duma.gov.ru*, 6 July 2022.

⁴⁴ "[Потери России в войне с Украиной. Сводка «Медиазоны»](#) [Russia's casualties in the war with Ukraine], *Mediazona*, updated in January 2024.

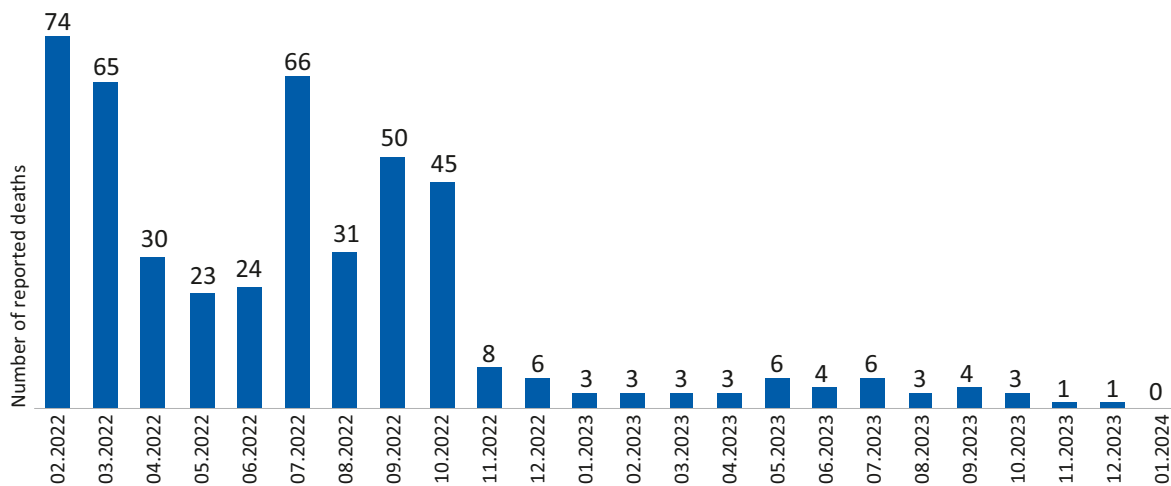


Figure 1. Number of reported deaths among Rosgvardiya servicemen in Ukraine (February 2022 – January 2024). Data source: Mediazona.

According to Russian military expert Ruslan Leviev, the number of Rosgvardiya fighters in Ukraine might have overall dropped compared to the early phases of the war, when Russian forces expected to occupy much larger portions of the country.⁴⁵

3.2. TERRITORIAL DEFENCE AND PUBLIC ORDER

One of the National Guard’s key functions has been to secure the rear for Russian regular units. This is clearly reflected in Rosgvardiya’s statutory task to “participate in the territorial defence of the Russian Federation,” which includes most notably fighting sabotage groups and protecting key civilian and military infrastructure facilities.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ruslan Leviev (@CIT), “СІТ — прямой эфир с вопросами и ответами [CIT - live broadcast with questions and answers],” YouTube, 29 December 2023, 58:55.

⁴⁶ Russian legislation defines territorial defence as “a system of measures carried out during the period of martial law for the protection and defence of military, important state and special facilities, facilities that ensure the livelihoods of the population, the functioning of transport, communications and connection, energy facilities, facilities that pose an increased danger to the life and health of people and for the natural environment, to combat sabotage and reconnaissance formations of foreign states and illegal armed groups, to identify, prevent, suppress, minimise and (or) eliminate the consequences of their sabotage, reconnaissance and terrorist activities in order to create favourable conditions for the functioning of these facilities and the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, military formations, bodies and special formations created for wartime.” State Duma and Federation Council (Russia), [Федеральный закон от 31.05.1996 N 61-ФЗ \(ред. от 25.12.2023\) “Об обороне”](#) [Federal Law “On Defence”, N 61-FZ (Moscow: State Duma and Federation Council: 31 May 1996), Article 22.

As such, the National Guard has fought against Ukrainian sabotage groups behind Russian lines (what is generally known in Russian as “sabotage and reconnaissance group,” *diversionno-razvedyvatel'naya gruppa*, DRG), being responsible for identifying and eliminating them, as well as detecting and destroying hidden weapons and ammunition caches that could be used for partisan activity.⁴⁷ Rear security activities have also reportedly included defending assets operated by the Russian Armed Forces, such as artillery and air defence systems, patrolling occupied settlements, establishing road checkpoints, running document checks, and enforcing curfew regimes.⁴⁸

Among the duties performed by Rosgvardiya is the control of key infrastructure facilities in occupied parts of Ukraine, which reflects the service’s territorial defence responsibilities but also other statutory tasks such as “guarding important state facilities, special cargos, and communication infrastructure” and providing

⁴⁷ For instance: “Росгвардия нашла крупный схрон с боеприпасами в ЛНР [Rosgvardiya found a large cache of ammunition in the LNR],” *Lenta.ru*, 26 October 2023.

⁴⁸ “Появились кадры работы артиллерии и разведки Росгвардии под Харьковом [Footage of the work of the artillery and Rosgvardiya’s reconnaissance near Kharkiv has appeared],” *Izvestiya*, 2 May 2022; Voennyi Osvedomitel’ (@milinfo), “Anti-Aircraft Missile And Gun System “Pantsyr-S1” In The Zone Of The Special Military Operation In Ukraine,” Telegram, 27 May 2022. See, for instance: Rosgvardiya on TV (@Rosgvardiya na TV), “Юг Украины готовится отметить Великую Победу. Спецрепортаж А. Степаненко [South of Ukraine is preparing to celebrate the Great Victory. A special report by A. Stepanenko],” Youtube, 2 May 2022.

state oversight over the “security of the fuel and energy complex facilities.”⁴⁹

In Ukraine, this has translated into a major Rosgvardiya role in the occupation of key energy infrastructure facilities captured by Russian forces, most notably the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia NPPs.⁵⁰ There is evidence that Rosgvardiya directly participated in the operations for the capture of these facilities: in May 2022, Andrei Frolenkov, deputy commander of Bryansk’s OMON unit “Arsenal,” was awarded the “Hero of the Russian Federation” title for his alleged leading role in the seizure of the Chernobyl NPP, reportedly guarded by a light presence of Ukrainian National Guard soldiers.⁵¹ Similarly, some sources claim that a Rosgvardiya Major General from Krasnodar led the operation to capture the Zaporizhzhia NPP.⁵² While the occupation of the Chernobyl NPP ended in late March 2022, as Russian troops withdrew from the Kyiv region, the National Guard remains at the Zaporizhzhia NPP at the time of writing, continuing to perform occupation and security functions, including the arrest of several of

the plant’s workers and the enforcement of an access control regime around the plant.⁵³

Rosgvardiya has also contributed to the protection of key logistical lines for the Russian war effort, including most importantly the Crimean Bridge. According to Russian legislation, Rosgvardiya has primary responsibility for protecting the water areas

Rosgvardiya has contributed to the protection of key logistical lines for the Russian war effort, including the Crimean Bridge

near the structure (while responsibility for the protection of the bridge’s road and railway components lies mainly on the Ministry of Transport, with the Ministry of Defence covering the air component).⁵⁴ In order to perform these duties, Rosgvardiya bases, in the nearby town of Kerch, one of its *spetsnaz* military units, the 115th Separate Special Purpose Brigade, comprising the 39th Maritime Detachment; another unit, the 144th Special Motorized Regiment, was reportedly transferred there in 2020 for the same purpose.⁵⁵ The service fields several maritime assets, including “Grachonok” anti-saboteur

⁴⁹ State Duma and Federation Council (Russia), [Федеральный закон от 3 июля 2016 г. N 226-ФЗ “О войсках национальной гвардии Российской Федерации” \(с изменениями и дополнениями\)](#) [Federal Law “On the National Guard Troops”, N 226-FZ (Moscow: State Duma and Federation Council, 3 July 2016), Article 2.

⁵⁰ The fact that Rosgvardiya performed occupation duties at the two plants was confirmed by the service’s own press channels early on in the war. [“Росгвардия сообщила, что принимает участие в охране Чернобыльской и Запорожской АЭС”](#) [Rosgvardiya reported that it is taking part in the protection of the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plants], TASS, 11 March 2022.

⁵¹ Rosgvardiya on TV (@Rosgvardiya на ТВ), [“Директор Росгвардии вручил медаль «Золотая Звезда» офицерам ведомства”](#) [The Rosgvardiya Director awarded the Golden Star medal to the service’s officers], Youtube, 5 May 2022; Vasco Cotovio, [“Ukrainians shocked by ‘crazy’ scene at Chernobyl after Russian pullout reveals radioactive contamination”](#), CNN, 9 April 2022.

⁵² [“Российские войска завезли неизвестный груз на Запорожскую АЭС, источники говорят о минировании электростанции \(видео\)”](#) [Russian troops delivered an unknown cargo to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, sources talk about mining the power plant (video)], *The Insider*, 5 August 2022; Energoatom (@energoatom_ua), [“Силовим захопленням Запорізької АЕС, наражаючи на небезпеку півсвіту та вчиняючи акти ядерного тероризму, керував генерал-майор домбровський олексій юрійович”](#) [The seizure of the Zaporizhzhia NPP by force, endangering half the world and committing acts of nuclear terrorism, was led by Major General Alexey Dombrovsky Yuriyovych], Telegram, 7 April 2022.

⁵³ Rosgvardiya has claimed to have arrested over 300 individuals for violating the access control regime as of December 2023. It is unclear which other Russian units occupy the plant apart from Rosgvardiya, but reportedly they also include elements of the Russian Armed Forces such as the Troops of Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defence (*voyska radiatsionnoy, khimicheskoy i biologicheskoy zashchity*, RKhBZ). Rosgvardiya (@Rosgvardiya), [“Запорожская АЭС – под защитой профессионалов”](#) [The Zaporozhzhia NPP is under the protection of professionals], VKontakte, 13 December 2023; [“Росгвардия задержала двух сотрудников ЗАЭС, сотрудничавших с ВСУ”](#) [Rosgvardiya detained two Zaporizhzhia NPP employees], *Ria Novosti*, 24 August 2022; [“Российский командир рассказал, что войска РХБЗ круглосуточно следят за ситуацией на ЗАЭС”](#) [The Russian commander said that RKhBZ troops are monitoring the situation at the Zaporozhzhia NPP around the clock], TASS, 15 June 2023.

⁵⁴ Government (Russia), [Постановление Правительства РФ от 29 сентября 2020 г. N 1566 “Об утверждении особенностей защиты от актов незаконного вмешательства объектов транспортной инфраструктуры, вокруг которых устанавливаются зоны безопасности”](#) [Government Decree “On the specificities of protection from acts of illegal interference against transport infrastructure facilities around which security zones are established”], N 1566 (Moscow: Government, 29 September 2020), para 3-4.

⁵⁵ Alexina Dorogan, [“Росгвардия в Крыму: карательный орган или еще одна армия?”](#) [Rosgvardiya in Crimea: a punitive body or another army?], *Radio Svoboda Krym.Realii*, 20 November 2023.

ships — reportedly armed with grenade launchers, machine guns, and “Igla” MANPADS — “Sargan” and “Afalina” patrol boats, as well as BK-16 landing crafts.⁵⁶ Successful Ukrainian attacks on the bridge, however, have likely caused some embarrassment for Rosgvardiya, as will be discussed in a later section.

Occupied Crimea appears to remain a key priority for Rosgvardiya’s infrastructure protection duties

Occupied Crimea appears to remain a key priority for Rosgvardiya’s infrastructure protection duties. As mentioned in section 1, Russian legislation establishes a list of facilities where Rosgvardiya protection is mandatory.⁵⁷ Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, two more facilities have been added to the list, both located in or near Crimea: the Administrative building of the

The National Guard has also performed its typical “public order” duties, such as quelling protests, detaining individuals, contributing to the security of the sham annexation referenda, and fighting pro-Ukrainian sentiments in the occupied territories

Legislative Assembly of the city of Sevastopol (Crimea) and a power substation in the town of Taman (Krasnodar region), which reportedly contributes to powering numerous

infrastructures in Southern Russia as well as the railway component of the Crimean bridge.⁵⁸

The National Guard has also performed its typical “public order” duties in the occupied territories. This has included quelling Ukrainian protests, detaining Ukrainian individuals and leading figures of Ukrainian civil society, with numerous reports of human rights violations committed by the service;⁵⁹ contributing to the security of major events such as the sham annexation referenda of October 2022;⁶⁰ and overall fighting pro-Ukrainian sentiments, including by confiscating what is deemed as extremist literature.⁶¹

3.3. THE HOMEFRONT

Throughout the war, Rosgvardiya has continued to perform its main duties inside Russia, although its ability to do so might come under question as much of its forces remain deployed in Ukraine. This risk was evidenced by the very first days of the war: in February 2022, for instance, Russia reportedly resorted to sending police detectives to help quell anti-war protests in the city of Yekaterinburg,

⁵⁶ Vladislav Sergienko, “Крымский мост и Керченский пролив: как и с каким вооружением их охраняют [The Crimean Bridge and the Kerch Strait: how and with what weapons they are guarded],” *Ria Novosti Krym*, 5 February 2022.

⁵⁷ The list was first outlined in Government Order N 928-r from 15 May 2017. The original document is available on the Russian government website, see Government (Russia), [Распоряжение Правительства Российской Федерации от 15.05.2017 № 928-р](#) [Government Order, “On the list of objects subject to mandatory protection by troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation”], N 928-r (Moscow: Government, 15 May 2017).

⁵⁸ The two facilities were added to the list in May 2022, see: Government (Russia), *Government Order, “On the list of objects subject to mandatory protection by troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation,”* as amended on 31 May 2022, 61-62. The substation was reportedly inaugurated in 2019, see: Irina Mochalova, “По команде Путина Павел Ливинский запустил подстанцию «Порт» в Краснодарском крае [At Putin’s command, Pavel Livinsky launched the “Port” substation in the Krasnodar region],” *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 13 March 2019.

⁵⁹ For example: Carlotta Gall, “Shocks, Beatings, Mock Executions: Inside Kherson’s Detention Centers,” *The New York Times*, 29 May 2023.

⁶⁰ “Росгвардия обеспечила безопасность проведения референдума в Донбассе [Rosgvardiya ensured the safety of the referendum in Donbas],” *TASS*, 28 September 2022.

⁶¹ Officially, one of Rosgvardiya’s statutory functions is the “participation in the fight against terrorism and extremism”. The Russian understanding of what constitutes extremism in Ukraine, however, has been very expansive, essentially covering almost any expressions of Ukrainian identity. Rosgvardiya (@RosgvardOfficial), “Росгвардейцы и военная контрразведка обнаружили в библиотеках ДНР более 300 экстремистских изданий [Rosgvardiya fighters and military counterintelligence discovered more than 300 extremist publications in DNR libraries].” Telegram, 11 October 2023.

precisely because the local OMON detachments had been deployed to Ukraine.⁶²

Rosgvardiya has continued to perform its main duties inside Russia by participating in the repression of demonstrations and defending the border areas near Ukraine

Nonetheless, Rosgvardiya participated in the repression of demonstrations against the war in Russian cities in February-March 2022 and those against Russia's partial mobilisation in late 2022.⁶³ Rosgvardiya units were also deployed to guard military commissariats (*voenkromaty*) in Moscow and other Russian cities, following attacks against these facilities after the announcement of a partial mobilisation campaign.⁶⁴

Rosgvardiya has also contributed to defending Russia's border areas near Ukraine, reflecting another of its key statutory tasks. Alongside the FSB's Border Service (*Pogranichnaya sluzhba*,

Rosgvardiya was also involved in the attempt to stop the Wagner Group's mutiny in June 2023

PS) as well as units from the Armed Forces and the MVD, the National Guard has reportedly been engaged in fighting Ukrainian cross-border operations, including most notably those conducted by pro-Ukrainian Russian groups in Bryansk and Belgorod regions in the first half of 2023.⁶⁵

⁶² Yevgeny Koshek, "[В Екатеринбурге разгонять антивоенные митинги отправят оперативников уголовного розыска](#) [Police field detectives will be sent to disperse anti-war rallies in Yekaterinburg]," *Yekaterinburg Onlayn*, 25 February 2022.

⁶³ "[ОМОН преследует протестующих по городу. Перекрыт Литейный проспект](#) [OMON chases protesters through the city. Liteyny Avenue is closed]," *Fontanka.ru*, 27 February 2022; "[Протесты против мобилизации в Москве и Петербурге: силовики задержали более тысячи человек, пострадали десятки митингующих](#) [Protests against mobilisation in Moscow and St. Petersburg: security forces detained more than a thousand people]," *Nastoyashcheye Vremya*, 21 September 2022.

⁶⁴ Tatiana Stekolnikova, "[Росгвардия усилила охрану военкоматов из-за нападений](#) [Rosgvardiya has strengthened security at military enlistment offices due to attacks]," *RBK*, 15 October 2022.

⁶⁵ Varvara Koshechkina, "[В Брянской области начался бой с украинскими диверсантами](#) [A battle with Ukrainian saboteurs began in the Bryansk region]," *Lenta.ru*, 2 March 2023; "[Нападение диверсантов на Белгородскую область и режим КТО](#) [Attack of saboteurs on the Belgorod region and the CTO regime]," *RBK*, 23 May 2023.

As a key force granting the regime security at home, Rosgvardiya was also involved in the attempt to stop the Wagner Group's mutiny in June 2023, which will be discussed next.

3.4. LIKE A KNIFE THROUGH BUTTER: WAGNER'S MUTINY

Rosgvardiya came once again under the spotlight as Wagner Group's head Yevgeny Prigozhin launched his mutiny against Russia's military leadership in June 2023. After all, one of the key reasons behind Rosgvardiya's creation was precisely to prevent a regime change by force. However, the National Guard appeared ill-prepared for the task. Wagner's rapid advance towards Moscow raised speculations that the National Guard may be reluctant to shield Putin given the heavy losses suffered by the service in the early phases of the war. It is likely though that Rosgvardiya, intended for confronting lightly armed organised groups, simply lacked the necessary capabilities to stop thousands of men equipped with tanks and heavy artillery.

Although it is unclear whether there was any significant engagement between Wagner and the National Guard — with the most visible attacks on the mutineers being inflicted by Russia's Aerospace Forces (*Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily, VKS*) — the evidence available points at the difficulty faced by the service in those critical hours.⁶⁶ A video from the day of the mutiny, for instance, showed Wagner Group heavy vehicles easily surpassing improvised car roadblocks in Rostov, all witnessed by powerless OMON fighters.⁶⁷ Other photos showed a joint Rosgvardiya and police roadblock on the road to Moscow featuring a BTR vehicle and several cars, unlikely to stop Wagner's advance.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, a

⁶⁶ Gareth Jennings, "[Russian Air Force suffers significant losses in Wagner mutiny](#)," *Janes*, 26 June 2023.

⁶⁷ Meduza (@Meduza), "[Мятеж Пригожина. Хроника событий](#) [Prigozhin's mutiny. Chronicle of events]," YouTube, 30 June 2023, 0:29.

⁶⁸ Voennyi Osvedomitel' (@milinfolive), "[Тот самый жиденький блокпост полиции и Росгвардии из одного БТР-80](#) [The same thin police and Rosgvardiya checkpoint with one BTR-80]," Telegram, 24 June 2023.

remarkable Rosgvardiya deployment within Moscow was reported.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, with Prigozhin eventually giving up on its drive to Moscow, Rosgvardiya members eagerly used the mutiny as an opportunity to showcase the service's prominent role in ensuring the regime's stability. A few days after the events, Zolotov rapidly moved to dismiss any potential doubts over his service's loyalty and performance: he declared that the reason why the Wagner column had managed to advance so deep inside Russia was because Rosgvardiya had concentrated its forces around Moscow. If the National Guard had dispersed its units, according to him, the Wagner Group would have gone through "like a knife through butter."⁷⁰ Alexander Khinshtein, a United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*) Duma Deputy who previously served as an advisor to Zolotov and is considered the service's main lobbyist inside the Russian parliament, would later write on his Telegram channel that the events had confirmed that the National Guard "will always remain an outpost of state stability."⁷¹

Against this backdrop, fearful of a repetition of a scenario like the June 2023 mutiny, the Kremlin has decided to significantly increase the National Guard's capabilities by adopting a law that allows the service to have tanks and

The decision to allow the service to have tanks and heavy artillery suggests a rising role of Rosgvardiya as not just an invasion force but also the embodiment of the Kremlin's concerns for internal security

heavy artillery.⁷² The Kremlin's decision appears to suggest a rising role of Rosgvardiya, being not just a key invasion force against Ukraine but also continuing to embody the Russian leadership's concerns for internal security.

4. A RISING FIGHTING FORCE? THE NATIONAL GUARD'S STANDING INSIDE RUSSIA

4.1. BAPTISM BY FIRE: NEW CAPABILITIES AND COMBAT EXPERIENCE

With new capabilities and significant combat experience, the National Guard is on track to potentially become a very significant armed force in Russia.

With new capabilities and significant combat experience, the National Guard is on track to potentially become a very significant armed force in Russia

- First, the capabilities that the service is set to receive will give the service increased firepower (as explained, Rosgvardiya currently does not field any tanks and its highest calibre artillery piece is reportedly the towed 122mm D-30 howitzer).⁷³ As Russia's military-industrial production is likely to prioritise the needs of the Armed Forces given the ongoing war effort, it remains unclear when Rosgvardiya will receive these new systems. However, the equipment will further elevate the service as a key internal security force, potentially making it capable of fighting heavily armed groups as well as increasing the significance of its contribution in conventional warfare

⁶⁹ "В Москве усилили меры безопасности [Security measures have been strengthened in Moscow]," TASS, 23 June 2023.

⁷⁰ Mikhail Dobrunov, "Глава Росгвардии объяснил быстрое продвижение ЧВК «Вагнер» [The head of the Rosgvardiya explained the rapid advance of the Wagner PMC]," RBK, 27 June 2023.

⁷¹ Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "Ровно 30 лет назад — страна едва не скатилась в пучину Гражданской войны [Exactly 30 years ago, the country almost slipped into the abyss of civil war]," Telegram, 4 October 2023.

⁷² Government (Russia), [Федеральный закон от 04.08.2023 № 446-ФЗ "О внесении изменений в Федеральный закон «О войсках национальной гвардии Российской Федерации»](#) [Federal Law "On amendments to the Federal Law on the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation"], N 446-FZ (Moscow: Government, 8 August 2023); Milena Kostereva, "Путин разрешил Росгвардии иметь на вооружении танки [Putin allowed Rosgvardiya to have tanks in service]," *Kommersant*, 4 August 2023.

⁷³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia," 197.

scenarios. While these changes will bring Rosgvardiya's capabilities in line with those once possessed by the service's predecessor — the MVD Internal Troops (VV), which fielded tanks during operations in the Northern Caucasus — this still represents a considerable novelty in today's Russia, as Rosgvardiya will be the first internal security agency with heavy weapons responding directly to the president.⁷⁴

Rosgvardiya will be the first internal security agency with heavy weapons responding directly to the president

- Second, the service can count on almost two years of deployment to a warzone, where it has likely gained invaluable experience. Being a relatively young structure, the National Guard may have been able to test some of its newest concepts such as a more unified command structure for special forces as experimented since 2018.⁷⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to value Rosgvardiya's experience as a rear security force: this is suggested, for instance, by Putin's choice in spring 2023 to appoint Aleksei Kuzemkov, until then a Rosgvardiya deputy director, as the new deputy defence minister in charge of logistics.⁷⁶
- Third, Rosgvardiya has also had a chance to test an unprecedented level of interaction and coordination with the Armed Forces, which is particularly important given that joint operations between the two bodies had been limited and only practised in sporadic exercises.⁷⁷ This is notably highlighted by instances where Rosgvardiya conducted reconnaissance and pinpointed targets for Army artillery, as well as by major operations where close coordination

between the two services was necessary.⁷⁸ For instance, according to a Rosgvardiya official, the service provided cover for regular troops as they retreated from Kherson city and the right bank of the Dnipro River in November 2022.⁷⁹ This experience could lead to an overall increase in the Russian military's combat effectiveness.

- Fourth, Rosgvardiya has also been growing in numbers. In the second half of 2023, the new 116th Separate Operational Purpose Brigade was created to serve in Donbas and, according to some reports, will field a very wide range of capabilities including tanks.⁸⁰ The recent approval of a law allowing Rosgvardiya to form volunteer units opens a road to the service's further expansion.⁸¹ According to many, these volunteer formations could constitute a new home for at least part of the former Wagner Group fighters after the group's dissolution following Prigozhin's mutiny.⁸²

In expanding, Rosgvardiya has continued to exercise its traditional role as a service able to incorporate controversial forces into state structures, a need made even more urgent by the proclaimed Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories. As such, Rosgvardiya has reportedly absorbed the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) "Vostok" Battalion, with its

⁷⁴ Vladimir Mukhin, "[Танковые войска внутреннего назначения](#) [Internal purpose tank troops]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1 April 2011.

⁷⁵ Bogdan Stepovoy et al, "[Росгвардия собирает элитные части в кулак](#) [Rosgvardiya is gathering elite units into a fist]," *Izvestiya*, 10 January 2018.

⁷⁶ "[Алексея Кузьменкова назначили замминистра обороны по материально-техническому обеспечению](#) [Alexey Kuzmenkov was appointed Deputy Minister of Defence for Logistics]," TASS, 30 April 2023.

⁷⁷ Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot, et al, *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality* (RAND, 2021), 41-45.

⁷⁸ Rosgvardiya's press channels have repeatedly reported cases in which the service allegedly conducted reconnaissance and pinpointed targets for Army artillery units. See, for instance: Rosgvardiya (@RosgvardOfficial), "[Новые кадры с передовой](#) [New footage from the front line]," Telegram, 22 December 2022.

⁷⁹ Rosgvardiya on TV (@Rosgvardия на ТВ), "[Директор Росгвардии посетил подразделения ведомства в Республике Крым и в Херсонской области](#) [Rosgvardiya Director visits the service's units in the Crimean Republic and Kherson Oblast]," YouTube, 3 February 2023.

⁸⁰ Sergey Koval, "[«Опричники Путина». Что известно о воинской части Росгвардии в Севастополе](#) [\"Putin's guardsmen.\" What is known about the military unit of Rosgvardiya in Sevastopol]," *Radio Svoboda Krym. Realii*, 22 November 2023.

⁸¹ President of Russia, "[Подписан закон о добровольческих формированиях в составе Росгвардии](#) [A law on volunteer formations within Rosgvardiya was signed]," Kremlin.ru, 25 December 2023.

⁸² Reports suggest that some former Wagner fighters have indeed joined Rosgvardiya. Anatoly Kurmanaev et al, "[Russia Steps Up Efforts to Lure Wagner Veterans Back into Ukraine War](#)," *The New York Times*, 9 November 2023.

head Alexander Khodakovsky becoming Deputy Head of Rosgvardiya's Main Directorate for DNR.⁸³ Another example is the "Oplot" Battalion (later expanded into a regiment), created within Rosgvardiya's 21st Separate Operational Purpose Brigade Zhukov by the systemic opposition party "A Just Russia – For Truth" in late 2022, and reportedly comprising pro-Russian fighters from the Donbas.⁸⁴ According to some sources, parts of the so-called DNR Ministry of Internal Affairs' "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation might also be absorbed by Rosgvardiya.⁸⁵

Rosgvardiya could play a prominent role in the regularisation of newly created forces whose legal status is still under discussion such as new territorial defence formations

Further to this, Rosgvardiya could play a prominent role in the regularisation of newly created forces whose legal status is still under discussion. This is the case, for instance, of the new territorial defence formations that some Russian regions bordering Ukraine have created. Not only Rosgvardiya has reportedly contributed to their training, but it could also play an oversight role over their arming, given the service's responsibility for state supervision

⁸³ Anastasia Larina, "[Батальон «Восток» из ДНР войдет в спецназ Росгвардии](#) [The Vostok battalion from the DNR will be included in the special forces of Rosgvardiya]," *Kommersant*, 25 March 2023; Alexander Khodakovsky (@aleksandr_s kif), "[«Восток» создавался под конкретные цели и задачи](#) [“Vostok” was created for specific goals and objectives]," Telegram, 25 March 2023.

⁸⁴ The Battalion was expanded into a regiment in the summer of 2023, with Russian nationalist writer Zakhar Prilepin being appointed deputy commander and receiving the title of colonel. "[Батальон партии Миронова решили создать в Росгвардии](#) [It was decided to create a battalion of Mironov's party in Rosgvardiya]," *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 7 November 2022; "[Формируется батальон «Оплот ЗА ПРАВДУ»](#) [The battalion "Oplot FOR TRUTH" is being formed]," A Just Russia Party Press Service, 2 November 2022; "[Прилепин стал подполковником Росгвардии](#) [Prilepin became lieutenant colonel of Rosgvardiya]," *RBK*, 14 August 2023.

⁸⁵ Cossack elements have also been incorporated into Rosgvardiya, as evidenced by the creation within the above-mentioned 116th Brigade of the "Tavrída" Battalion, reportedly composed of Cossack fighters from Crimea (UK Ministry of Defence (@DefenceHQ), "[Latest Defence Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine – 07 January 2024](#)," Twitter, 7 January 2024; Irina Kamysheva, "[В Крыму формируют особый батальон Росгвардии – казачий](#) [A special battalion of Rosvardiya is being formed in Crimea – a Cossack one]," *Ria Novosti Krym*, 13 September 2023.

of firearms ownership and considering that territorial defence members already holding gun ownership permits are likely to be prioritised in the arming process.⁸⁶

At the same time, although the war has offered some venues for growth, it has also presented the service with formidable challenges. First of all, Rosgvardiya has to deal with the most direct consequence of the full-scale invasion, which is war casualties. Overall, as of December 2023, open-source investigators have verified the death of hundreds of Rosgvardiya servicemen

— with the real number likely to be much higher — including over 130 officers.⁸⁷ Among them are at least 6 Colonels and 14 Lieutenant Colonels.⁸⁸ Regardless of the outcome of the war, these losses, as well as lowering standards for recruitment as the service seeks manpower, are likely

to negatively impact Rosgvardiya's combat effectiveness and force quality in the short to medium term.⁸⁹

Second, there still seem to be considerable issues in command and control (C2) and overall coordination between Rosgvardiya and other military and security forces. This was particularly evident at the beginning of the war, with Rosgvardiya units advancing ahead of the regular forces' armour, and has likely continued to have an impact throughout the war. In October 2022, for instance, retired

⁸⁶ Maria Lisitsyna and Dmitry Serkov, "[Картаполов предложил создать единый штаб по охране границы с Украиной](#) [Kartapolov proposed creating a single headquarters to protect the border with Ukraine]," *RBK*, 26 May 2023.

⁸⁷ Data from Mediazona and BBC. "[Russia's Casualties In The War With Ukraine](#)," *Mediazona*, as updated in January 2024; Olga Ivshina, "[«Год мясорубок»: что нам известно о потерях России в Украине за 2023 год](#) [“Year of meat grinders”: what do we know about Russia's losses in Ukraine in 2023]," *BBC Russian Service*, as updated in January 2024.

⁸⁸ "Russia's Casualties in the war with Ukraine."

⁸⁹ This has included eliminating the age limit of 35 years to join internal affairs bodies and the National Guard with an amendment signed by Putin in August 2023. President of Russia, "[Федеральный закон от 04.08.2023 г. № 436-ФЗ О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации](#) [Federal Law "On amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation"], N 436-FZ (Moscow: Kremlin, 4 August 2023), Art 2; President of Russia, "[Подписан закон, уточняющий порядок и условия прохождения службы в войсках Росгвардии и органах внутренних дел](#) [A law has been signed clarifying the procedure and conditions for serving in Rosgvardiya troops and internal affairs bodies]," *Kremlin.ru*, 4 August 2023.

Russian General Leonid Ivashov observed that Rosgvardiya was still not directly subordinated to the commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, remarking on Russia's fragmented command structure.⁹⁰

In January 2023, the Kremlin tried to solve these issues by appointing General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Russia's General Staff, as head of Russian forces in Ukraine. By Russian law, the General Staff has an overall coordination role of all federal security authorities, including the National Guard, for the defence of the country, thereby allowing for a better unity of command.⁹¹ A Russian commentator, for instance, observed that the previous commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovikin, could only interact with Rosgvardiya through the service's own command structures, with the appointment of Gerasimov having a consolidating effect.⁹² Although C2 might have improved, there still seem to be coordination issues between Rosgvardiya and the various military and security structures. According to Head of State Duma Defence Committee Andrei Kartapalov, for instance, the security structures responsible for defending the border, which include among others the FSB, Rosgvardiya, and the Armed Forces, have so far mostly worked in a fragmented way, without much joint effort.⁹³

The National Guard and the Armed Forces could find themselves competing for manpower and military equipment

Finally, some politicians inside Russia have voiced concerns that Rosgvardiya's recent growth, and notably the appearance of

⁹⁰ Maksym Bugriy, "Will General Surovikin Fix Russia's C2 Problems?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 19 Issue 172 (November 2022).

⁹¹ Alexis A. Blanc, Alyssa Demus, et al, *The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a "Besieged Fortress"* (RAND, 2023), 15.

⁹² Andrey Fedorov, Anton Lavrov, et al, "Статусное свершение: Валерий Герасимов стал командующим спецоперацией [Status achievement: Valery Gerasimov became commander of the special operation]," *Izvestiya*, 12 January 2023.

⁹³ Maria Lisitsyna and Dmitry Serkov, "Карталов предложил создать единый штаб по охране границы с Украиной [Kartapalov proposed creating a single headquarters to protect the border with Ukraine]," *RBK*, 26 May 2023.

volunteer units, might pose a risk of duplication and clash with the regular Armed Forces.⁹⁴ Although this possibility appears so far remote, there are, nonetheless, signs that the National Guard and the Armed Forces could find themselves competing for manpower and military equipment, notably as Rosgvardiya seeks to receive heavy artillery and tanks in a context of limited defence industrial output. The next sections will discuss the National Guard's self-preservation moves in the institutional competition for resources with other security and defence institutions.

4.2. PROTECTING THE FIEFDOM: THE MANPOWER RUSH

Suffering heavy losses at the beginning of the war – and, nonetheless, being responsible for a wide range of tasks in Ukraine while continuing to perform key security duties in Russia – the National Guard has unsurprisingly been scrambling for manpower. In doing so, it has occasionally found itself in competition with other institutions, such as the Armed Forces and the MVD. To a significant extent, these structures have similar recruitment pools, prioritising men with previous military experience.

In this context, Rosgvardiya has sought to attract manpower by offering generous short-term contracts to men willing to serve in Ukraine. Local news, for instance, reported that the salary of a Rosgvardiya fighter in Ukraine might be well over double that of an equivalent position within Russia.⁹⁵ According to a recruitment advertisement that appeared in June 2022 for service in Chelyabinsk's 23rd Special Purpose Detachment "Obereg" (*Otryad spetsyalnogo naznacheniya*, OSN), the salary for participating in so-called work trips (that is, fighting in Ukraine) amounted to 140 000 rubles (currently about \$1 500), over triple

⁹⁴ Ksenia Veretennikova, "Чтобы как НКВД [To be like the NKVD]," *Kommersant*, 17 October 2023.

⁹⁵ Pavel Tiunov, "Новосибирцев зовут на контрактную службу. Журналист НГС попытался устроиться и изучил, сколько платят [Novosibirsk residents are called to contract service. The NGS journalist tried to get a job and studied what the pay is]," *Novosibirsk Onlayn*, 9 June 2022; "Жителям Поморья предлагают служить в Росгвардии: узнали про условия и зарплату [Residents of Pomorie are offered to serve in Rosgvardiya: we learned about the conditions and salary]," *Arkhangelsk Onlayn*, 10 October 2022.

the pay for equivalent roles in Russia.⁹⁶ With these measures, Rosgvardiya has attempted to not lag behind the Armed Forces, which have also offered large compensation for service in Ukraine.

Rosgvardiya saw a sizable part of its recruitment pool being forcibly redirected towards the Armed Forces

However, Russia's declaration of partial mobilisation in September 2022 visibly complicated Rosgvardiya's recruitment efforts. With the mobilisation decree targeting only Russia's regular forces, Rosgvardiya saw a sizable part of its recruitment pool being forcibly redirected towards the Armed Forces. This was particularly significant for former Rosgvardiya fighters, who, despite constituting a primary target for the National Guard's recruitment, were now subject to mobilisation having often previously served in the military.

These issues were rapidly noted by people associated with Rosgvardiya. A day after Putin's announcement, Alexander Khinshtein, Rosgvardiya's closest man in the State Duma, expressed concerns over the fact that the mobilisation order only concerned the Armed Forces while excluding the National Guard despite the latter's role in Ukraine. As he argued, the decree risked leading to the mobilisation of numerous former Rosgvardiya fighters into the Armed Forces, thus depriving them of the possibility to serve in their own former service.⁹⁷ The issue appeared particularly problematic for former Rosgvardiya police fighters, such as OMON and SOBR, who could end up serving in the Armed Forces in lower military positions rather than according to their much more senior police ranks. Khinshtein, for instance, cited an example in which a former Rosgvardiya OMON colonel had been mobilised in the Armed Forces with the rank of captain.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Pavel Tiunov, "[Новосибирцев зовут на контрактную службу](#) [Novosibirsk residents are called to contract service]," *Novosibirsk Onlayn*, 9 June 2022.

⁹⁷ Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "[Пример моего коллеги Юрия Швыткина, решившего вернуться в строй для участия в СВО, высветил системную проблему](#) [The example of my colleague Yuri Shvytkin highlighted a systemic problem]," Telegram, 22 September 2022.

⁹⁸ Alexander Khinshtein, "The example of my colleague Yuri Shvytkin."

In this context, the National Guard has apparently pushed for additional measures to protect its manpower sources. In spring 2023, Khinshtein presented to the Russian parliament a bill allowing personnel subject to mobilisation in the Armed Forces but with previous service experience in National Guard units (or their MVD predecessors) to choose to serve in Rosgvardiya.⁹⁹ The proposal was signed into law by Putin in August 2023.¹⁰⁰ Other measures have contributed to keeping the National Guard competitive, often mirroring provisions that had already been put in place for the Armed Forces. In November 2022, for instance, Putin signed a decree establishing an immediate one-time payment of 195 000 rubles (currently a little over \$2 000) for those signing a contract of one year or longer with the Armed Forces during the war.¹⁰¹ A little more than a month later, the same measure was extended to contracts for military service concluded with the National Guard.¹⁰²

Although the impact of some of these measures remains unclear, their approval shows the extent to which the National Guard

⁹⁹ Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "[Подготовил к внесению в Госдуму ранее анонсированный мной законопроект](#) [I have prepared the bill I previously announced for submission to the State Duma]," Telegram, 18 April 2023.

¹⁰⁰ The law has revised Articles 1, 2, 11, and 20 of the [Federal Law "On mobilisation preparation and mobilisation in the Russian Federation"](#), N 31-FZ, February 26, 1997, and added Article 17.2. President of Russia, [Федеральный закон от 04.08.2023 г. № 436-ФЗ О внесении изменений в отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации](#) [Federal Law "On amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation"], N 436-FZ (Moscow: Kremlin, 4 August 2023), Art 1.

¹⁰¹ Government of Russia, [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.11.2022 № 787 "О единовременной денежной выплате военнослужащим, проходящим военную службу по контракту в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации"](#) [Presidential Decree "On the one-time cash payment to military personnel performing military service under a contract in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"], N 787 (Moscow: Government, 2 November 2022).

¹⁰² Government of Russia, [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.12.2022 № 991 "О внесении изменений в Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 2 ноября 2022 г. № 787 "О единовременной денежной выплате военнослужащим, проходящим военную службу по контракту в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации"](#) [Presidential Decree, "On amendments to the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated November 2, 2022 N 787"], N 991 (Moscow: Government, 30 December 2022).

has been able to argue its case to the Kremlin.¹⁰³ This is particularly striking when compared to the MVD, which, unlike the National Guard, has had no apparent legal or financial shield to remain competitive in recruitment. In fact, the MVD has long suffered from a manpower shortage, defined as “critical” by Russia’s Minister of Internal Affairs in August 2023.¹⁰⁴ Now, the issue might deteriorate further as potential candidates are likely to favour much more lucrative positions for service in Ukraine within the Armed Forces or even Rosgvardiya rather than low-paid police jobs in Russia.

Rosgvardiya has apparently co-opted private security companies to generate additional manpower

It is also worth noting that since the beginning of the war, Rosgvardiya has apparently co-opted private security companies to generate additional manpower. Rosgvardiya has a unique leverage over these companies: as explained above, when it was created in 2016, the service inherited the MVD’s state oversight functions on private security companies, which include giving out licences that allow their operations and monitoring their compliance with the law. In practice, this means that Rosgvardiya can use these powers to exert significant influence over ChOPs.

When the war began, Rosgvardiya reportedly forced ChOP workers to support the service in repressing anti-war protests in Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad region.¹⁰⁵ ChOPs have also been deployed to Ukraine, apparently mostly to guard schools in the occupied territories. According to local Russian outlets, ChOPs across Russia were occasionally directly approached by Rosgvardiya to send men to Ukraine, raising questions on whether their

participation happened on a voluntary basis. For instance, in the Zabaykalsky region (East Russia), Rosgvardiya reportedly asked ChOPs’ directors to select candidates among their employees and deploy them to guard schools in occupied Donbas.¹⁰⁶

This role of the ChOPs as a potential reserve force for Rosgvardiya had already been imagined in theory by researchers. Sliwa, for instance, had remarked that the National Guard’s oversight role over the ChOPs could allow the service “to influence them during peacetime and to possess full knowledge of their manpower, capabilities and tasks” and enable a division of local security tasks, “releasing the National Guard for more critical duties” and enhancing “coordination and mutual support during crisis response operations and war.”¹⁰⁷ Further to this, ChOP workers constitute an excellent recruitment pool, often possessing previous experience in military and law enforcement structures.¹⁰⁸ Being a reserve force for not just the National Guard, but also the Armed Forces, the September 2022 mobilisation obliged many ChOP workers to serve in the Armed Forces, with some commentators estimating that around 100 000 ChOP employees could be mobilised.¹⁰⁹ This represented yet another reason for the National Guard to lobby for measures to protect its manpower sources as described above.

¹⁰³The author is unaware of any reports suggesting that Rosgvardiya has mobilised personnel serving in its ranks, which raises questions over whether the law has been implemented so far. Regardless, its approval remains significant, as it gives Rosgvardiya the possibility to defend its manpower base at least in theory.

¹⁰⁴“Колокольцев заявил о критической нехватке личного состава в МВД [Kolokoltsev announced a critical shortage of personnel in the Ministry of Internal Affairs],” *Izvestiya*, 10 August 2023.

¹⁰⁵“Частных охранников обязали помогать Росгвардии в Петербурге [Private security guards were obliged to help Rosgvardiya in St. Petersburg],” *BBC Russian Service*, 14 March 2022.

¹⁰⁶This was also reported in other regions. Varvara Lebedeva, “Забайкальским ЧОПам предложили сторожить школы в Донбассе [Transbaikal private security companies were offered to guard schools in Donbas],” *Chita Onlayn*, 21 August 2022; Dmitry Veselov, “Работа в охране школ на территориях ДНР и ЛНР может стать довольно прибыльной [Working in school security in the territories of the DNR and LNR can become quite profitable],” *Gazeta Metro Moscow*, 31 August 2022.

¹⁰⁷Zdzislaw Sliwa, *The Russian National Guard: A Warning or a Message?* (National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2018), 29.

¹⁰⁸Moreover, many of them were left looking for employment after losing their jobs following the withdrawal of foreign companies from Russia. Maria Sosnina, “Из ЧОПов по всей России массово уходят сотрудники. Мы выяснили куда [Employees are leaving en masse private security companies across Russia. We found out where they go],” *MSK1.ru*, 16 May 2022.

¹⁰⁹Dmitry Sokolov, “Эксперт рассказал, сколько сотрудников ЧОП могут попасть под мобилизацию [The expert told how many private security company employees could be mobilised],” *Argumenty i fakty*, 22 September 2022.

4.3. EATING UP RIVALS

The National Guard has been relatively successful not just in preserving itself from the excessive competition with the Armed Forces but also in growing further at the expense of the MVD. Since Rosgvardiya's formation, the MVD has been the service's main rival. After all, the National Guard is itself composed of units that were taken away from the MVD, causing a certain irritation in the Ministry's leadership.¹¹⁰ In this context, leveraging on its prominent role in the war compared to the Ministry's more limited one, Rosgvardiya has been able to score a few hits against the MVD.

Since Rosgvardiya's formation, the MVD has been the service's main rival

First, in the summer of 2023, Rosgvardiya was able to absorb one of the MVD's last *spetsnaz* police units, "Grom." Originally part of the defunct Federal Anti-Drug Service (*Federal'naya sluzhba po kontrolyu za oborotom narkotikov*, FSKN), "Grom" was moved from the FSKN to the MVD in 2016 — the FSKN was, in fact, absorbed by the MVD — just as the MVD's own police special units (SOBR and OMON) were transferred to the newly-created National Guard. Deprived of its key special units and forced to go through a clumsy command chain whenever in need of *spetsnaz* backup, having to file requests to the National Guard, the MVD started viewing "Grom" as a substitute for its lost *spetsnaz* forces.¹¹¹ Although mostly intended for anti-drug operations, de facto "Grom" rapidly began being used for a much wider range of activities that would normally be conducted by SOBR.¹¹² The question remained unresolved: to the MVD, "Grom" was one of the last bastions of independence for its special operations, while for Rosgvardiya, it represented an affront to its quasi-monopoly over police special units.

¹¹⁰Mark Galeotti, "The Silovik-Industrial Complex: Russia's National Guard as Coercive, Political, Economic and Cultural Force," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 29, Issue 1 (February 2021): 12-14.

¹¹¹Mark Galeotti, "The Silovik-Industrial Complex:" 12.

¹¹²Arkady Kolybalov and Mikhail Falaleev, "Единственный отряд спецназа МВД обеспечивает работу оперативников [The only MVD special forces detachment ensures the work of police field detectives]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 1 December 2019.

Leveraging its role in the war in Ukraine, Rosgvardiya took on the offensive against the MVD. In spring 2023, Khinshtein accused the MVD of trying to create a "mini-Rosgvardiya" within its ranks, claiming that the Ministry planned to formally expand "Grom" functions beyond anti-drug operations and increase its personnel to 6 200 people, reportedly more than double its number in 2016.¹¹³ Such a move was viewed as a threat to Rosgvardiya's position. According to Khinshtein, since the beginning of 2023, the number of MVD requests for the intervention of Rosgvardiya special units have halved, with "Grom" de facto being used as a substitute for SOBR.¹¹⁴ Further, Khinshtein claimed that the MVD was enlarging "Grom" essentially by attracting Rosgvardiya SOBR and OMON personnel with the offer of better contracts, in what appeared to be an institutional competition for manpower.¹¹⁵

The war in Ukraine, once again, became a key battleground used to gain political points and the Kremlin's favour. Khinshtein did not shy away from reminding of the National Guard's role in the full-scale invasion, warning that such an MVD rivalry would be extremely dangerous at a time "when Rosgvardiya (unlike the MVD) directly participates in the special military operation."¹¹⁶ On its part, the MVD also tried to use the war in Ukraine to shield itself, releasing a press note arguing that the staffing levels increase of "Grom" was due to "the operational situation related to the conduct of the special military operation, in which employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation are directly involved."¹¹⁷ This explanation, however, was

¹¹³Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "В МВД — семимильными шагами идет создание собственной мини-Росгвардии [In the MVD, the creation of the Ministry's own mini-Rosgvardiya is progressing by leaps and bounds]," Telegram, 5 April 2023.

¹¹⁴Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "In the MVD, the creation of the Ministry's own mini-Rosgvardiya."

¹¹⁵Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "Создание в недрах МВД параллельной Росгвардии 2:0 — продолжается по всем фронтам [The creation within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of a parallel Rosgvardiya 2:0 continues on all fronts]," Telegram, 12 April 2023.

¹¹⁶Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "In the MVD, the creation of the Ministry's own mini-Rosgvardiya."

¹¹⁷Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Официальная информация пресс-центра МВД России [Official information from the MVD press centre]," *MVD Media*, 13 April 2023.

insufficient for Putin: in July 2023, the Russian President finally decided to transfer “Grom” to Rosgvardiya.¹¹⁸ Once again, the National Guard was able to argue its point to the Kremlin, capitalising on its role in Ukraine as well as its enhanced internal security role after Prigozhin’s failed mutiny a month earlier.¹¹⁹

Second, there is evidence that the National Guard has taken measures to further consolidate its role as the main state supervision authority over firearms trade at the expense of the MVD. As explained above, this function also belonged to the MVD but was largely transferred to Rosgvardiya in 2016. In this context, there have been at times discussions over whether to transfer these responsibilities back to the MVD. Just a little more than a month before the beginning of the 2022 full-scale invasion, for instance, the idea was pitched by Head of Russia’s Investigative Committee Sergei Bastrikhin in the aftermath of two school shooting incidents featuring legally owned weapons.¹²⁰ Although the proposal did not eventually go through, it caused a backlash from Rosgvardiya circles and showed that Rosgvardiya’s quasi-monopoly over gun oversight powers was far from unquestioned.¹²¹

The war in Ukraine might be now offering a unique opportunity for Rosgvardiya to double down on its oversight role. Against the backdrop of increasing illegal firearms trafficking within

Russia’s border regions as a result of the nearby war, some Russian commentators have advocated for centralising oversight powers even further under the National Guard.¹²²

The war in Ukraine might be now offering a unique opportunity for Rosgvardiya to double down on its oversight role

Rosgvardiya has apparently taken advantage of this: in July 2022, for instance, the Duma passed a Rosgvardiya-sponsored (and MVD-opposed) bill which mandates the MVD to transfer the weapons it seizes to the National Guard within 4 months (no such limits existed earlier) and further consolidates destruction responsibilities for confiscated weapons under Rosgvardiya.¹²³

Rosgvardiya remains far from being Putin’s first-choice security service, a position largely reserved for the FSB

4.4. BUT KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Gaining ground in the rivalry with the MVD, the National Guard has not always enjoyed the same success elsewhere. There are questions over whether the service could sustain a more

¹¹⁸Natalia Anisimova, “[Полицейский спецназ «Гром» передали в подчинение Росгвардии](#) [The police spetsnaz “Grom” was transferred to the subordination of Rosgvardiya],” *RBK*, 17 July 2023.

¹¹⁹Indeed, according to *Vedomosti*, preparations for the transfer of “Grom” to Rosgvardiya began after Prigozhin’s mutiny. Maxim Solopov, “[Силловые ведомства прорабатывают вопрос о переподчинении полицейского спецназа «Гром» Росгвардии](#) [Security agencies are considering the issue of reassigning the police spetsnaz “Grom” to Rosgvardiya],” *Vedomosti*, 4 July 2023.

¹²⁰Anna Naraeva and Alexey Nikolsky, “[Попытка отнять у Росгвардии контроль за оружием противоречит изначальной идее Путина](#) [The attempt to take away gun control from Rosgvardiya contradicts Putin’s original idea],” *Vedomosti*, 13 January 2022.

¹²¹Znak.com via Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), “[Депутат Госдумы РФ Александр Хинштейн вступил в заочную полемику с главой Следственного комитета РФ Александром Бастрыкиным](#) [State Duma deputy Alexander Khinshtein entered into an indirect debate with the head of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation Alexander Bastrykin],” Telegram, 13 January 2022.

¹²²The increasing risk of illegal firearms trafficking as a result of the war in Ukraine has been reported by several Russian officials, including Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Kolokoltsev as well as Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov. Elizaveta Lamova and Yevgenia Voropaeva, “[МВД сообщило о росте числа изъятого оружия рядом с зоной спецоперации](#) [The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported an increase in the number of weapons seized near the special operation zone],” *RBK*, 19 October 2022; “[Генпрокурор РФ указал на высокие риски нелегального завоза оружия из зоны СВО](#) [The Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation pointed out the high risks of illegal import of weapons from the special military operation zone],” *Interfax*, 20 October 2023. For instance, see: Yana Surinskaya, “[Росгвардия создаст базу данных для контроля за оборотом оружия](#) [Rosgvardiya will create a database to control the circulation of weapons],” *Vedomosti*, 13 October 2023.

¹²³Elena Mukhametshina, “[Право МВД на хранение изъятого у граждан оружия может быть ограничено](#) [The right of the Ministry of Internal Affairs to store weapons confiscated from citizens may be limited],” *Vedomosti*, 1 June 2022. Rosgvardiya is also taking moves to further consolidate its oversight powers, such as making greater use of digital tools to track weapons trafficking. Yana Surinskaya, “[Росгвардия создаст базу данных для контроля за оборотом оружия](#) [Rosgvardiya will create a database to control the circulation of weapons],” *Vedomosti*, 13 October 2023.

long-term and systemic rise that goes beyond targeting low-hanging fruits such as the MVD. It appears clear that Rosgvardiya remains far from being Putin's first-choice security service, a position largely reserved for the FSB.

This is well illustrated by the institutional struggle over the division of tasks for the protection of a strategic facility like the Crimean Bridge, where Rosgvardiya has seemingly failed to attain a greater security role. As the Crimean bridge was being constructed, Rosgvardiya reportedly offered to take responsibility for the protection of the entire structure.¹²⁴ However, as explained above, the National Guard eventually received primary responsibility only for the protection of the sea areas around the bridge, while the road and railway components were assigned to the Ministry of Transport's own security structures, notably the Departmental Security Directorate (*Upravlenie vedomstvennoy okhrany*, FGUP UVO, a state company offering paid security services).¹²⁵

The Ministry of Transport as Rosgvardiya's competitor

Although to a much lesser extent compared to the MVD, the Ministry of Transport has not always been on good terms with Rosgvardiya. This is mostly due to the fact that the Ministry of Transport's Departmental Security Directorate (FGUP UVO) offers paid security services in Russia, making it a market competitor of Rosgvardiya's own Extradepartmental Security units (OVO) and Federal State Unitary Enterprise "Okhrana." In this market, Rosgvardiya competes not just with private security companies but also with the Departmental Security bodies (*vedomstvennaya okhrana*) of other Russian state structures. These units can protect

¹²⁴Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), "На записях с камер хорошо видно, что досмотр начинённой взрывчаткой фуры не де-факто проводился. Почему?" [The recordings from the cameras clearly show that the inspection of the truck filled with explosives was de facto not carried out. Why?], Telegram, 8 October 2022.

¹²⁵Government of Russia, [Постановление Правительства РФ от 29 сентября 2020 г. N 1566 "Об утверждении особенностей защиты от актов незаконного вмешательства объектов транспортной инфраструктуры, вокруг которых устанавливаются зоны безопасности"](#) [Government Decree "On the specificities of protection from acts of illegal interference"], N 1566 (Moscow: Government of Russia, 29 September 2020), Paragraphs 3 and 4.

relevant administrative facilities as well as offer paid security services in their respective spheres of competence — for instance, the Ministry of Energy's Departmental Security guarded the Ministry's own administrative buildings and also some energy industrial facilities.¹²⁶ After the Departmental Security bodies of both the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Agriculture were absorbed by Rosgvardiya in 2019, the Ministry of Transport's UVO was left as one of the largest Departmental Security bodies in Russia, with personnel of reportedly around 14 000–17 000.¹²⁷ As such, the National Guard and the Ministry's UVO have reportedly often found themselves in turf wars for the defence of key facilities.¹²⁸

In this context, when a truck explosion damaged the facility in October 2022 — reportedly the work of Ukraine's intelligence services — Alexander Khinshtein lambasted the Ministry of Transport, accusing it of having failed to protect the bridge sections under its responsibility and implicitly advocating for a greater National Guard role in the structure's security. Namely, Khinshtein reiterated that Rosgvardiya had expressed its willingness to take over the security of the entire structure during its construction while claiming that "the then leadership of the Ministry of Transport

¹²⁶A list of the objects guarded by the Ministry of Energy's Departmental Security as of 2018 is available online. Ministry of Energy (Russia), [Приказ Минэнерго России от 04.07.2016 N 637 \(ред. от 08.10.2018\) "Об утверждении перечня охраняемых ведомственной охраной Министерства энергетики Российской Федерации объектов топливно-энергетического комплекса"](#) [Зарегистрировано в Минюсте России 19.07.2016 N 42902] [Order of the Ministry of Energy "On the establishment of the list of fuel and energy complex facilities protected by the Ministry of Energy's departmental security"], N 637 (Moscow: Ministry of Energy, 4 July 2016).

¹²⁷President of Russia, [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.10.2019 № 509 "О реорганизации федерального государственного унитарного предприятия "Охрана" Федеральной службы войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации"](#) [Presidential Decree "On the reorganisation of the federal state unitary enterprise "Okhrana" of the Federal Service of the National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation"], N 509 (Moscow: President of Russia, 21 October 2019); "20 лет УВО Минтранса России" [20 years of the Ministry of Transport's UVO], Ministry of Transport, 2022; Jolanta Darczewska, "Rosgvardiya: a special-purpose force," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) Point of View* 78 (May 2020): 42.

¹²⁸Svetlana Basharova, "Враг Росгвардии № 1: кто мешает Золотову зарабатывать миллиарды?" [Rosgvardiya's enemy no 1: who is stopping Zolotov from earning billions?], *Baza*, 25 October 2019.

convinced the government that it could deal with this task on its own.”¹²⁹

The measures taken by Vladimir Putin to increase the bridge’s security, however, have shown that any potential hope for a greater Rosgvardiya role was misplaced. Although Deputy Minister of Transport Aleksander Sukhanov, overseeing transport security, was eventually fired, Putin did not expand Rosgvardiya’s role to the protection of the facility but opted instead to give more responsibilities to the Federal Security Service (FSB).¹³⁰

On the contrary, the National Guard would suffer a few embarrassing moments related to the security of the bridge over the following months.¹³¹ In March 2023, Sergei Volkov, a Rosgvardiya colonel heading the technical development department of the service’s Maritime Directorate, was arrested for having concluded a 400-million-ruble deal for the

¹²⁹Alexander Khinshtein (@Hinshtein), “The recordings from the cameras.”

¹³⁰The FSB’s increased role was reflected in a decree signed by Putin one day after the explosion, which gave the agency the role of coordinator of the measures for protection of the bridge and key energy facilities in the region, including a gas pipeline connecting the Krasnodar region to Crimea that is currently under the protection of Rosgvardiya’s OVO units. This was further enhanced in July 2023 by a government decree which still left the Ministry of Transport with the responsibility of implementing security measures for the bridge’s road and railway components but tasked the FSB to exercise an overall coordinating function over them. President of Russia, [Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 08.10.2022 № 724 “Об усилении мер защиты транспортного перехода через Керченский пролив, электросетевого энергомаста Российской Федерация - полуостров Крым и магистрального газопровода Краснодарский край - Крым в период их эксплуатации”](#) [Presidential Decree “On strengthening measures to protect the transport crossing across the Kerch Strait, the electric grid energy bridge between the Russian Federation and the Crimea Peninsula and the main gas pipeline between the Krasnodar Territory and Crimea during their operation”], N 724 (Moscow: President of Russia, 8 October 2022); Government of Russia, [Постановление Правительства РФ от 7 июля 2023 г. N 1120 “О внесении изменений в особенности защиты от актов незаконного вмешательства объектов транспортной инфраструктуры, вокруг которых устанавливаются зоны безопасности”](#) [Government Decree “On the introduction of changes in the specificities of protection from acts of illegal interference against transport infrastructure facilities around which security zones are established”], N 1120 (Moscow: Government of Russia, 7 July 2023).

¹³¹Artyom Korenyako and Timofey Dzyadko, “[Замглавы Минтранса уйдет в отставку после взрыва на Крымском мосту](#) [Deputy Head of the Ministry of Transport to resign after the explosion on the Crimean bridge],” *RBK*, 20 October 2022.

purchase of two systems destined to the defence of the bridge but technically incapable of countering enemy drones.¹³² This was followed, in July 2023, by a second successful Ukrainian attack on the Crimean Bridge, this time carried out by sea drones in what is nominally Rosgvardiya’s primary area of responsibility in the structure’s security, adding further embarrassment.¹³³

The National Guard leadership seems to have only limited direct access to Vladimir Putin

All the above hints at potential obstacles to a more systemic National Guard rise, notably if compared to the much more dominant FSB. It is unsurprising, in this sense, that the National Guard leadership seems to have only limited direct access to Vladimir Putin: despite the service’s prominent role in the war against Ukraine, Rosgvardiya Head Zolotov has apparently had only one (publicly known) one-to-one meeting with the president since February 2022.¹³⁴ In this context, Zolotov has consistently taken steps to prove his zealous commitment to the Kremlin’s war efforts, for instance, by travelling at least twice to occupied parts of Ukraine.¹³⁵ The case of the Crimean Bridge also shows that the war against Ukraine exposes the service to the risk of failing to deliver on key Kremlin priorities, which could end up weakening Rosgvardiya’s standing within the system and making it rapidly lose its hard-earned positions.

Contrary to what one might imagine, it is also unlikely that the National Guard’s leadership would try to attain a more leading position in a violent way — for instance, by overthrowing the regime. Like other Russian defence bodies, Rosgvardiya is under the watchful surveillance of the FSB’s Department

¹³²Yuri Senatorov, “[Полковник — не орел](#) [The Colonel is not an eagle],” *Kommersant*, 30 March 2023.

¹³³Nick Paton Walsh, Victoria Butenko, et al, “[The moment Ukraine used an experimental drone to attack a Russian bridge](#),” *CNN*, 15 August 2023.

¹³⁴The meeting in question took place in August 2022, as mentioned at the beginning of section 3.

¹³⁵“[Золотов посетил подразделения ведомства в Херсонской области](#), [Zolotov visited Rosgvardiya units in the Kherson region], *TASS*, 24 June 2022; Rosgvardiya (@RosgvardOfficial), “[Директор Росгвардии посетил подразделения ведомства в Крыму и Херсонской области](#) [The director of Rosgvardiya visited the service’s units in Crimea and the Kherson region],” Telegram, 3 February 2023.

of Military Counterintelligence (*Departament voyennoy kontrrazvedki*, DVKR).¹³⁶ This, paired with Zolotov's own personal allegiance to Putin, makes the prospect of a Rosgvardiya plot against the regime rather improbable.

It is also unlikely that the National Guard's leadership would try to attain a more leading position in a violent way

CONCLUSIONS

Playing a key role as both an invasion force against Ukraine and a guarantor of the regime at home, the National Guard is well-positioned to further grow as a prominent security agency inside Putin's Russia. The significance and leverage of the National Guard as a fighting force will increase further as the service is set to receive new capabilities, including tanks and heavy artillery, although it might take long before they have been delivered. The National Guard enjoys a favourable moment to further increase its power base, most notably at the expense of the much weaker Ministry of Internal Affairs.

It is difficult to overestimate the role that the service would play if the survival of the regime was seriously challenged, meaning that Putin would likely go to great lengths to ensure the National Guard's loyalty. Should Zolotov retire from his post while the current Russian regime still stands, his successor as Rosgvardiya director would inherit a service with significant potential and a remarkable opportunity to gain personal influence inside Russia.

At the same time, the past two years of war have highlighted obstacles to a more leading National Guard role. Having apparently only limited direct access to the Kremlin, Zolotov's service remains far from enjoying the same status as other prominent security agencies, such as the predominant FSB. In a context where pressure on the federal budget is set

to increase in the coming years, the National Guard could find itself in a precarious position, especially if pushed to a more overt competition for resources with the Armed Forces. Having suffered heavy losses and appearing already overstretched, the service may end up with much responsibility on its shoulders but squeezed between multiple voracious heavyweights, a position that could prove to be very uncomfortable and even fatal.

After all, the very existence of the National Guard as an independent body might rest on a shaky foundation. The increasingly militarised and strengthened National Guard may currently mirror Putin's need to control a force capable of responding to what he sees as the west's assault against Russia, ready to combat unrest inside the country and deploy to continue its mission abroad. However, this

The very existence of the National Guard as an independent body might rest on a shaky foundation

not only indicates that the Kremlin might fail to understand that the greatest sources of instability for the regime lie within Russia itself — in the everyday needs of its people rather than alleged foreign conspiracies — but could also mean that in a future Russia, with a new leader and a different understanding of security, the National Guard, an embodiment of Putin's thinking, might simply disappear.

¹³⁶Sanshiro Hosaka, "[Putin's Counterintelligence State](#)," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 14 December 2022, 16; Government of Russia, [Федеральный закон от 03.04.1995 г. № 40-ФЗ](#) [Federal Law "On the Federal Security Service"], N 40-FZ (Moscow: Kremlin, 3 April 1999), as amended on July 3, 2016, Article 12, paragraph "ж".

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NARVA MNT. 63/4, 10120 TALLINN, EESTI
INFO@ICDS.EE, WWW.ICDS.EE

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