

# Russia's Militia Groups and their Use at Home and Abroad



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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

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# Abstract

What makes the militia milieu so unique and important for understanding today's Russia is that it finds itself at the intersection of state institutions, patronage mechanisms, criminal structures, and grassroots illiberal activism. Abroad, the Kremlin plays through it one of its major "hybrid warfare" cards, outsourcing activities traditionally conducted by intelligence entities and allowing for plausible deniability. The militia realm thus seems destined to play a growing role in Russia's law-enforcement, military and intelligence culture both at home and abroad. Its role is multi-layered: at a minimum, it fosters social consensus around the regime and its values, but it also secures access for the power ministries to thousands of patriotic-minded and trained citizens potentially ready to be recruited. A sociology of the militia culture is still to be written. It is not a marginal one: it groups several hundred thousand activists—in the sense of people participating in paramilitary activities in one form or another of—and some millions of supporters, constituting one of the cores of the popular support for the regime. This article explores the rise of this militia realm and its societal context, looking at the diverse socio-cultural niches that contribute to its development: the unique, historically rooted role of the Cossacks; the revival of military-patriotic clubs for children and teenagers; far-right militias and their partial co-option by some state organs; Putin's patronage of martial arts and biker culture, and the rise of the first Orthodox vigilante groups. It excludes private security companies (PSCs), and ethnic militia such as *Kadyrovtsy*, and focuses on the "ethnic Russian" militia and their use by the political authorities at home and abroad.

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# Introduction

Several studies report a worldwide rise in the militia phenomenon, understood as groups of volunteer citizens, trained and organized in a military fashion, who act as auxiliaries of the police or army, whether or not they are recognized by the state.<sup>1</sup> The transformation of warfare, the multiplication of asymmetric and hybrid conflicts, the diffusion of small weapons, and the privatization of security services in different regional contexts all contribute to explaining that rise. In Europe, the phenomenon is too often considered to belong to the past, chiefly the interwar period, with Germany's *Freikorps* exemplifying the many fascist and para-fascist brigades of the time. Yet militias are reappearing on European territory, first in the Balkans in the 1990s, then in Central Europe<sup>2</sup> and in Ukraine since the outbreak of the 2014 war, as well as in Russia. In Russia, the militia phenomenon is particularly complex because the political regime, more authoritarian than in neighboring Ukraine, maintains a considerable degree of control over any forms of outsourcing of law-enforcement duties. The rise of the militia phenomenon cannot, therefore, be interpreted as a sign of a "failing" or even weakened state, as was the case in the Balkans and is the case for Ukraine.

The Russian term "militia" contains several ambiguities. For one thing, the police were known as "militia" (*militsiia*) during Soviet times and was rebranded "police" (*politsiia*) only in 2011. Moreover, the term "militia", broadly understood, covers several categories of groups and activities. The more highly trained groups may sometimes become paramilitary forces in the sense of private military companies (PMCs) that can be recruited by the state to perform military duties in parallel with official army troops, such as the famous Wagner group involved in Syria. Yet many militia groups remain confined to more modest roles as police auxiliaries. Another important nuance is the distinction between militia in the sense of groups of citizens acting in a law-enforcement capacity

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1. See, for instance, the US National Intelligence Council report on global trends and their implications through 2035: "Global Trends: Paradox of Progress", National Intelligence Council, January 2017, [www.dni.gov](http://www.dni.gov).

2. A. De Liedekerke, "The Paramilitary Phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2016, pp. 25-34.

(i.e. with legal authority) and militia in the sense of vigilante groups (i.e. without legal authority).<sup>3</sup>

What makes the militia milieu so unique and important for understanding today's Russia is that it finds itself at the intersection of state institutions, patronage mechanisms, criminal structures, and grassroots illiberal activism. This symbiotic relationship allows an exchange of skills between political authorities (mostly security services), and criminal networks, whose functions overlap as much as they compete, as well as with some grassroots activists in search of new patrons. The intimate interpenetration between the criminal world and the law-enforcement agencies in Russia is a well-known phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> This context provides fertile soil for several phenomena that help us contextualize the rise of militias.

First, the Russian private security industry is mushrooming: in 2017 it comprised around 23,000 registered firms (certified by the Russian National Guard), employing about 700,000 people and securing 900,000 places.<sup>5</sup> While private security companies (PSCs) are legal, PMCs are not. The Duma discussed a bill legalizing the latter in early 2018 but it remains to be passed<sup>6</sup>—although, given the rising world market for them, such companies could probably be legalized in the future. Moreover, many former members of the security services, very often from the GRU (Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate), have become businessmen, serving as brokers who mediate between special forces and state institutions, on the one hand, and the private security world and far-right groups, on the other.

A second, critical, aspect influencing this symbiotic relationship has been the links between hooligan groups and the security services—dating back to the Soviet era—and the alternation between extensive freedom and more tenuous control, accompanied by repression. The violence committed by Russian fans in Marseille during the 2016 UEFA European Championship and preparations for the 2018 World Cup constituted two push factors that moved the authorities to be more efficient in controlling soccer-related violence and their most famous groups. For instance, the

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3. D. Pratten and A. Sen (eds.), *Global Vigilantes*, London: Hurst, 2007.

4. It has been studied by, among others, M. Galeotti in his recently released book *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) and S. Stephenson in her book *Gangs of Russia: From the Streets to the Corridors of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), and her current research: S. Stephenson, "It Takes Two to Tango: The State and Organized Crime in Russia", *Current Sociology*, Vol. 65, No. 3, 2017, pp. 411-426.

5. "Konceptsiia razvitiia vnedomstvennoj okhrany na period 2018-2021 godov i dalee do 2025 goda" [The concept of private security development from 2018-2021, and beyond to 2025], Rosgvardiia, 2017, <http://rosgvard.ru>.

6. "Russia Eyeing Private Military Companies Market with New Legalization Bid", RT, 17 January 2018, [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com).

Spartak fan club, one of the most violent, was taken under control and each of the main clubs in Moscow was designated a Federal Security Service (FSB) officer to work with a fan liaison officer.<sup>7</sup> This strategy was successful, as shown by the perfectly smooth running of the World Cup. As we will see below, one of the main functions of many military-patriotic and martial arts clubs is to channel the energies of youths who might be attracted to hooliganism and could find themselves challenging power ministries in the streets.

Last but not least, the Presidential Administration has turned toward outsourcing means of influence abroad, especially to boost its soft power in Europe.<sup>8</sup> This strategy has contributed to the rapid strengthening and increased visibility of extra-state agents, both at home and outside Russia's borders. Yet this new realm of proxies tends to be too often and too easily interpreted as a well-oiled, top-down hierarchy, with "the Kremlin" or "Putin" sitting at its top and deciding on every direction. On the contrary, the proliferation of grey zones that are neither totally grassroots nor state-sponsored should be comprehended as a fundamental feature of the regime and its adaptive nature. This allows for many ideological entrepreneurs or proxies to take advantage of their room for maneuver to develop strategies that (they suppose) serve their interests in relation to the Kremlin, without knowing exactly when they cross red lines and may lose support from their patrons—who have their own, competing, agendas.<sup>9</sup>

This article explores the rise of this militia realm and its societal context, looking at the diverse socio-cultural niches that contribute to its development: the unique, historically rooted role of the Cossacks; the revival of military-patriotic clubs for children and teenagers; far-right militias and their partial co-option by some state organs; Putin's patronage of martial arts and biker culture, and the rise of the first Orthodox vigilante groups. It excludes the case of the PSCs, as well as that of ethnic militia such as *Kadyrovtsy*, and focuses on the "ethnic Russian" militia and their use by the political authorities at home and abroad.

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7. S. Parkin, "The Rise of Russia's Neo-Nazi Football Hooligans", *The Guardian*, 24 April 2018, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

8. A. Dimitrova, M. Frear, H. Mazepus *et al.*, "The Elements of Russia's Soft Power: Channels, Tools, and Actors Promoting Russian Influence in the Eastern Partnership Countries", *EU-STRAT Working Paper*, No. 4, July 2017, <http://eu-strat.eu>; A. Sergunin and L. Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy", *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4, 2015, <https://pure.spbu.ru>.

9. M. Laruelle, "The Kremlin's Ideological Ecosystems: Equilibrium and Competition", *PONARS Policy Memo*, No. 493, November 2017, [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org).



# A Long Tradition... Adjusted to Today's Needs

## The Cossack Legacy and Revival

The militia tradition is not a new one: it has deep roots in Russian and Soviet history. Historically, Russia's first militia consisted of the Cossacks, peasant-soldiers who lived as self-governing entities and were tasked with protecting the borders of the Russian empire and securing new conquered territories in Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Largely liquidated during the Soviet regime, they re-emerged during perestroika and obtained recognition of their special status in 1996-1997.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, a federal law called "On State Service of the Russian Cossacks" enabled them to work for all the power ministries: as border-guards for the FSB, as well as for the Interior Ministry, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the Ministry of Defense.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, Putin celebrated them, stating that "the mission of the state now is to help the Cossacks, draw them into military service and educational activities for youths, involving a patriotic upbringing and initial military training."<sup>12</sup> Yet public opinion perceives them in a more ambivalent manner: in a 2013 survey, 32% respondents said they played a positive role in Russia, 11% a negative one, and half of respondents did not answer. But their role as militia, "supervising public order alongside the police", as specified in the survey, was approved by 61% of respondents.<sup>13</sup>

Besides those activities for which they have official status, Cossacks have also been involved in informal activities, protected by some influential patrons inside state structures. Cossack contingents have participated in the first post-Soviet secessionist conflicts of the early 1990s, the two wars in Chechnya, the 2008 Georgian-Russian conflicts in South Ossetia and

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10. B. Skinner, "Identity Formation in the Russian Cossack Revival", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6, 1994, pp. 1017-1037; H. Toje, "Cossack Identity in the New Russia: Kuban Cossack Revival and Local Politics", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 7, 2006, pp. 1057-1077.

11. M. Goryunov, "Who Are the Russian Cossacks of Modern Times?", Intersection Project, 10 June 2016, <http://intersectionproject.eu> (currently unavailable).

12. V. Putin, "Vladimir Putin: 'Byt' sil'nymi: garantii natsional'noj bezopasnosti dlia Rossii" [To be strong: guarantees of national security for Russia], *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 20 February 2012, <https://rg.ru>.

13. "'Vol'nye liudi': Otnoshenie k sovremennomu kazachestvu" [Free people: The attitude of Russians towards modern Cossacks], FOM, 26 July 2013, <https://fom.ru>.

Abkhazia, and the insurgency currently under way in Donbas.<sup>14</sup> In the south of Russia, especially in Krasnodar, Stavropol and Rostov-on-Don, Cossack guard formations work not only as border guards but also as municipal police, valorizing their role as guarantors of “defenders of public order” (*okhrana obshchestvennogo poriadka*). Protected by the local authorities, they have been regularly involved in interethnic violence against migrants and in criminal schemes. Since 2016, the Moscow municipality, too, has employed the Central Cossack Troops to control public spaces alongside the OMON, especially during protests, and has offered training for law-enforcement roles to a few hundred of them.<sup>15</sup>

Some sources calculate that 450,000 people are a registered part of Cossack communities, with 38,000 of them working in a paid government service and 70,000 participating in the “defense of public order” as voluntary brigades accompanying the regular police.<sup>16</sup> Another source estimates that 122,000 Cossacks are registered in some form of state service.<sup>17</sup> Their field of action mostly covers civil security domains: police auxiliaries, as well as forest conservation; firefighting; providing assistance during natural disasters, accidents and other emergencies; inculcating patriotic values in children and young people, and preparing them for military service. Cossacks thus constitute a unique case in which a paramilitary structure is endowed, on the basis of its historical legitimacy, with several official functions. Cossacks exemplify the multifunctionality of a militia: inculcating a patriotic mindset in young people, offering civilian help to armed forces, and the outsourcing of “law and order” mechanisms to non-state actors.

## Civilians, Patriotism and Law Enforcement: A Regime Triangle

In Soviet times, there were innumerable cases of civilians being drawn into law-enforcement work. In each neighborhood, local cells of the Communist Party or the Komsomol—organized as *druzhina*—were in charge of helping the police prevent delinquency and steer young people away from “risky

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14. R. Arnold, “Testing Constructivism: Why Not More ‘Cossacks’ in Krasnodar Kray?” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 6, 2014, pp. 481-502.

15. “Kazaki-druzhinniki proshli obuchenie po okhrane obshchestvennogo poriadka” [Cossack combatants were trained in the protection of public order], Mos.ru, 5 March 2018, [www.mos.ru](http://www.mos.ru).

16. M.G. Kapustina, “Strategiia vozrozhdeniia kazachestva na federal’nom i regional’nom urovniakh” [Strategy for the revival of the Cossacks at the federal and regional levels], Academy of National Economy and State Service under the President of the Russian Federation, 15 February 2017, <https://cyberleninka.ru>.

17. Informatisionnoe agentstvo Rossiiskogo Kazachestva [Russian Cossacks information agency], <http://ruskazaki.ru>.

behavior”, an activity also known as social prophylaxis (*obshchestvennaia profilaktika*). This tradition largely disappeared with the radical changes of the 1990s but was revived in the 2000s by various civil society institutions with conservative agendas. They benefitted from the broad social consensus around the army and the power ministries as institutions embodying the Russian state: in 2017, the military and intelligence agencies were ranked second behind the president in terms of trust in institutions (69% for the army and 57% for the security services), putting them ahead of even the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>18</sup>

The regime itself favors the notion of civilians as active defenders of both the homeland and domestic order. The implementation of patriotic militarized education programs since 2001 has contributed to rebranding perceptions of paramilitary activity. Step by step, the state program for the “patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation” has been rebuilding the Soviet infrastructure for bringing up young people and instilling in them “love for motherland (*Rodina*), devotion to fatherland (*otechestvo*), and willingness to serve its interests and defend it, up to and including self-sacrifice (*samopozhertvovanie*)”.<sup>19</sup>

This state-sponsored patriotism has fueled the revival of another Soviet tradition: military and paramilitary training in schools. In the late Soviet period, Basic Military Preparation (*Nachal'naia voennaia podgotovka*, or NVP) was—at least in theory—a mandatory and universal class for both genders in the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades. This curriculum was revamped in 1989 and reintroduced in schools under the name of “ObZh” (*Osnovy bezopasnosti zhiznedeiatel'nosti*, The Bases of Life Safety Skills).<sup>20</sup> ObZh covers a wide range of topics, from preparedness for emergency situations and introductions to medical first aid and healthy living to initiation into state security issues and preparation for military service. It has been complemented by the Ready for Work and Defense program (*Gotov k trudu i oborone*, or GTO). More motivated pupils can participate in para-curricular patriotic activities such as the military-sports games *Zarnitsa*, *Orlënok* and *Pobeda*, which reproduce military actions.

A large part of the population supports the idea of paramilitary training for youth, which is considered a good way to instill discipline in teenagers.<sup>21</sup> As early as 2003, a Levada Center poll found that 83% of

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18. “Institutional Trust”, Levada Center, 10 November 2017, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

19. “Kontseptsiiia patrioticheskogo vospitaniia grazhdan Rossijskoi Federatsii” [The concept of patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation], *Rossmolodiozh'*, 21 May 2003 (no longer available).

20. “Istoriia OBZh v dokumentakh” [History of the ObZh in documents], OBZh, <http://обж.рф>.

21. S. Webber, “La jeunesse et la sphère militaire en Russie: une zone (dé-)militarisée?” [Youth and the military sphere in Russia: a (de)militarised zone?], in A. Le Huérou and E. Sieca-

respondents were in favor of introducing a basic military training course to schools. In 2004, 62% supported the idea of reviving the Soviet practice of patriotic military education, compared to just 22% who disapproved.<sup>22</sup> More recently, in 2016, another Levada Center poll found that 89% of respondents supported some form of “patriotic education” in schools; 78% specifically backed the revival of the Soviet-era Basic Military Preparation program.<sup>23</sup>

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Kozłowski (eds.), *Culture militaire et mobilisation patriotique dans la Russie d'aujourd'hui* [Military culture and patriotic mobilisation in today's Russia], Paris: Karthala, 2008, pp. 171-192.

22. E. A. Vovk, “Patrioticheskoe vospitanie: slovom ili delom?” [Patriotic education: in word or deed?], *Fond obshchestvennogo mneniia*, 5 February 2004.

23. “78% rossiiian khotiat vernut' uroki NVP” [78% of Russians want to bring back NVP lessons], Levada Center, 1 September 2016, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

# Militia Revival in the Nationalist Underground

## Blackshirt Militia: RNE as a Role Model

Although the Soviet *druzhina* system collapsed with the abrupt disappearance of Soviet ideology and its supporting structures, militias quickly re-emerged in the nationalist underground. Obviously, radical far-right movements cannot be considered as militia *per se*, as they advance a clear ideological agenda that goes beyond the “law and order” focus of militia; however, many of these movements have been dreaming of “enforcing” their worldviews on the streets, and cultivate an aesthetics that celebrates the historic Italian model of Mussolini’s “Blackshirts”.

The most famous of these was the far-right Russian National Unity (*Russkoe natsional'noe edinstvo*, RNE), which openly displayed neo-Nazi references.<sup>24</sup> Led by Aleksandr Barkashov (1953), the RNE portrayed itself not only as a political party, but also as a mass movement ready to defend Russian interests against hostile elements. During the October 1993 confrontation between Yeltsin and the parliament, the RNE patrolled around the White House on behalf of the rebel parliamentarians and controlled entry to the Supreme Soviet building.<sup>25</sup> In the following years, Barkashov’s prestige within the nationalist movement was at its apogee, buoyed by the participation of RNE volunteers in the secessionist conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia, and then in the Yugoslav wars.

Between 1993 and 1997, the RNE was Russia’s main militia, with about 15,000 active members and between 50,000 and 100,000 supporters, as well as the vague backing of approximately 10% of the population.<sup>26</sup> It could rely on a considerable territorial network: with

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24. See V. Likhachev and V. Pribylovsky, *Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo 1990-2000* [Russian National Unity 1990-2000], Stuttgart, Ibidem Verlag, 2005; M. Sokolov, “Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo: analiz politicheskogo stilia radikal'no-natsionalisticheskoy organizatsii” [Analysis of the political style of a radical nationalist organization], *POLIS*, No. 1, 2006, p. 67-77.

25. T. Parland, “Russia in the 1990s: Manifestations of a Conservative Backlash Philosophy”, in C. J. Chulos and T. Piirainen (eds.), *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identities in Russia*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2000, pp. 116-140.

26. J. B. Dunlop, “Alexander Barkashov and the Rise of National Socialism in Russia”, *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1996, <http://demokratizatsiya.pub>; S. Gunnar Simonsen, “Aleksandr Barkashov and Russian National Unity: Blackshirt Friends of the Nation”, *Nationalities Papers* 24, No. 4, 1996, pp. 625-639.

about 350 regional entities, of which 100 were officially registered, it was the fourth-largest organization in the country behind the Communist Party, the then presidential party Democratic Choice of Russia, and Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). Its internal structure was strictly hierarchical: membership involved several caste-like levels that could be attained only after intensive training. Once this training had been successfully completed, the new partisans (*soratniki*) led small groups of about ten people, which were in turn integrated into a larger pyramidal structure. The party offered members the chance to either engage in a volunteer militia or work in the private security sector for businessmen sympathetic to the party. Several Communist leaders, including Gennady Zyuganov himself, used RNE bodyguards when they travelled.<sup>27</sup>

Local RNE chapters registered as sporting clubs or centers for military preparedness, and their members patrolled alongside state police. The wealthiest groups specialized in paramilitary training (weapons-handling, martial arts, hand-to-hand combat and parachute jumping) and were well-equipped with all-terrain vehicles, trucks, boats and weapons; they also attended training camps. The RNE appeared to have developed close contacts with key power ministries, such as Interior and Defense.<sup>28</sup> It regularly collaborated with regional military units and, with the discreet backing of the authorities, imposed order in the streets, notably in Voronezh, Stavropol and Krasnodar. The movement also boasted “mobile units” for Moscow and the surrounding region, which could have been used to initiate guerrilla warfare.

The prestige of the RNE gradually faded in the late 1990s with the birth of new far-right parties, the growing structuring of skinhead youth, and the movement's loss of support. It was temporarily revived with the 2014 Ukrainian war and the organization's support for the insurgency in Donbas. That year, the official VKontakte page of Barkashov's Russian National Unity, “Ia—russkii”, had about 224,000 subscribers, and his party, Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo—which had been shut down by the authorities—claimed 68,000 members.<sup>29</sup> Even defunct, the RNE's

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27. Shenfield, D. Stephen, *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*, New York/London: M.E. Sharpe, 2001, p. 173.

28. A. Verkhovskii, E. Mikhailovskaia, and V. Pribylovskij, *Politicheskaia ksenofobiia: Radikal'nye gruppy, predstavleniia liderov, rol' tserkvi* [Political xenophobia: radical groups, leaders' mindset, and role of the churches], Moscow, Panorama, 1999.

29. E. Pain, “Sovremennyy russkij natsionalizm v zerkale runeta: o ‘partii interneta’ i ‘partii televizora’” [Contemporary Russian nationalism in the mirror of the internet: on the “internet party” and the “television party”], *Forum novejshej vostochnoevropskoj istorii i kul'tury*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2015, [www1.ku-eichstaett.de](http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de).

successes and methods remain a classic reference for all those who dream of a blackshirt militia in Russia.

## Training youth in warfare

When the RNE disappeared from the scene, skinheads became the only radical-right movement to enjoy visibility on the streets. However, in the early 2010s, their visibility also declined. As with other radical groups, few were able to secure enough members and patrons to develop some paramilitary activity. One of the only ones to have succeeded is Denis Gariev's Russian Imperial Movement (*Russkoe imperskoe dvizhenie*, RID), which has existed since the mid-2000s as a small, monarchist, ultra-Orthodox movement offering paramilitary and martial arts training in the basement of a suburban building in St Petersburg. RID was able to develop commercial activities such as the fashionable hobby of training for extreme situations or urban warfare situations, and prepared two "volunteer legions" for the Donbas insurgency.<sup>30</sup>

Another example is Dugin's youth movement, the Eurasianist Youth Union (*Evraziiskii Soiuz Molodezhi*, ESM), which claims to represent "the squadrons of the Eurasian revolution", says it wants to "create a new army", and speaks of a "great purge".<sup>31</sup> To bring these war metaphors to life, the ESM has organized several training camps for the so-called anti-Orange movement. Held every year since 2005, the biggest ones were a 2007 camp in Crimea and a 2008 one in North Ossetia, each of which drew a few hundred young people.<sup>32</sup> During ESM summer camps, young participants studied Eurasianist doctrine, Russian history and Orthodoxy, and of course urban warfare training, especially preparations for street demonstrations. Since 2013, the ESM camps have "gentrified" and include more academic lectures and less paramilitary training, even if the warfare aspect got reinvigorated with the participation of several tens of ESM young militants in the Donbas insurgency.<sup>33</sup>

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30. A. Roth, "A Right-Wing Militia Trains Russians to Fight the Next War—With or Without Putin", *The Washington Post*, 2 January 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

31. "Programma Evrazijskogo Soiuz Molodezhi" [Program of the Eurasianist Youth Union], *Rossiiia-3: Evrazijskij Soiuz Molodezhi*, [www.rossia3.ru/programma.html](http://www.rossia3.ru/programma.html).

32. "Zavershilsia osennij lager' ESM" [The ESM autumn camp has ended], *Rossiiia3.ru*, 10 October 2007, <http://archive.today>. See also "Lager' ESM v Iuzhnoi Osetii. Reportazh Evraziia TV" [The ESM camp in South Ossetia. Evrazia TV Report], *Evrazia.tv*, 5 July 2007, <http://evrazia.tv> (currently unavailable).

33. A. Shekhovstov, "Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and The Russian-Ukrainian War", in M. Bassin and G. Pozo (eds), *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 181-200.

Many less famous patriotic clubs also prepare youth for warfare, often under the protection of a powerful patron, usually a businessman who considers it his duty to finance patriotic training activities. One example is the Militia of Holiness and Honor (*Druzhina sviatosti i chesti*), an association that funds small patriotic clubs of monarchic persuasion with the support of local parishes and the financial backing of a successful businesswoman.<sup>34</sup> Another especially notable one is the Rus' network, which includes about ten patriotic clubs in the Moscow region financed by a former KGB officer who served with the Russian border-guard service and runs several firms specializing in office supplies; 10% of their profits go to the Rus' network.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Interview with Lidia, member of the Militia of Holiness and Honor, Saint Petersburg, 18 December 2008.

35. Interview with advisers at the Rus' network, Moscow, 15 June 2009.



# Militarized patriotism, Extreme Sports and their Powerful Patrons

Far from being solely a product of Russia's active nationalist underground, the militia world succeeded in being co-opted by powerful patrons who secure connections with state structures. Three milieus can be identified as providing fertile soil for it: the military-patriotic clubs for children and teenagers, the martial arts realm and the bikers networks. The first and broadest is mostly supervised by military-related institutions, while the latter two find themselves more directly under Putin's patronage.

## Military-patriotic clubs: warfare as a hobby

The most institutionalized milieu is that of military-patriotic clubs for children and teenagers, offering training in weapons-handling, combat and military discipline. Today, more than 5,500 military-patriotic organizations are registered all over the country,<sup>36</sup> comprising about 250,000 youths.<sup>37</sup> Some of them are affiliated with schools or municipal authorities, others are linked to the Church or army, while others entirely depend on private financing and function effectively as businesses (*i.e.* they generate profits).

All share the idea that sports in general, and extreme sports in particular, are the best way to raise youths—especially those from “disadvantaged families” (single-parent families and families with unemployed or alcoholic parents). They also promote the moral values of fraternity and responsibility. Beyond this thematic dimension, these clubs display wide diversity in ideology and activities, from those that promote Soviet-style patriotism and very classical veneration of the Great Patriotic War to those that subscribe more or less openly to the monarchist cause (such as Orthodox clubs and scout movements). Some focus on getting

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36. “Chislo voenno-patrioticheskikh klubov v Rossii prevysilo 5,5 tysiachi” [The number of military-patriotic clubs in Russia now exceeds 5,500], RIA Novosti, 5 April 2016, <https://ria.ru>.

37. “Chislennost' uchastnikov dvizheniia ‘Iunarmii’ uzhe prevysila 230 tysiach chelovek” [The number of participants in the “Iunarmii” movement has already exceeded 230,000 people], RIA Novosti, 19 May 2018, <https://ria.ru>.

youths ready for military service, while others offer a wider range of training in sports, martial arts and outdoor activities.<sup>38</sup>

Former military personnel, including from the security services, run most of these clubs. They tend to be former *Afgantsy* (personnel who served during the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989), former *Spetsnaz*, members of the Alfa and Vypel troops, or former contractors from the Russian army. All of them need to build a new professional niche for themselves after re-entering civilian life. The veterans from Afghanistan began entering the field of youth supervision in the 1980s,<sup>39</sup> and this trend continued when those who had served in Chechnya were decommissioned. Their military clubs often have a dual face: on the one hand, they welcome children either free of charge or at a very low cost, and on the other, they organize highly profitable business activities, such as private security services for businessmen or martial arts courses for children from wealthier families.

Professionalizing their patriotic commitment can thus be both a survival tactic and a profitable business. All these former men of war make the most of their privileged relationship with the power ministries and enjoy discounted access to various facilities and (para)military installations such as shooting ranges. They likewise use their connections to military institutions to offer their clients reduced-price access to paramilitary material and training sites; for example, for parachute jumping. The clubs' relations with military structures are usually not institutionalized but personalized: a club may be allowed to train at an army camp only because the club's director personally knows one of the local high-ranking officers.

## Martial arts

Martial arts constitute a second milieu, with less visible and more complex connections to state structures. In Russia, martial arts cover three main domains: Asian martial arts; so-called Russian martial arts, particularly *sambo* (an acronym for *samozashchita bez oruzhiia*, or self-defense without weapons); and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), a full-contact combat sport, excluded from major international competitions due to a lack of well-established rules and a high level of injuries.

These three domains have been progressively structured and integrated into the officially sanctioned pantheon of paramilitary activities. Sambo constituted the central art of Sistema, a holistic combination of

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38. *Ibid.*

39. E. Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian Military Patriotic Education: A Control Tool Against the Arbitrariness of Veterans", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2010.

several paramilitary techniques—ranging from hand-to-hand combat, knife-fighting and firearms training to survival in extreme situations—taught in Soviet security services schools.<sup>40</sup> Since then sambo has been reinstated as the quintessential Russian martial art, able to compete with its Asian counterparts and imbued with spiritual values: self-awareness, endurance, self-control, respect for the enemy, and patriotism. Many sambo sportsmen pair martial arts techniques with Orthodox values, in much the same way as Asian martial arts are infused with Taoism or Confucianism. The Russian Orthodox Church itself has been involved in promoting sambo. In 2002, the Patriarchate's Department of External Relations stated that wrestling had a positive impact on the human body and mind.<sup>41</sup> In 2010, the alliance between sambo, patriotism and the Church was completed: Anatoly Khlopetsky, the famous sambo trainer, declared that “our mission, jointly with the Russian Orthodox Church, is to work and develop a shared ideology of sambo,” while the deputy director of the Synodal department for relations between the Church and society, Georgy Roshin, reiterated that the Patriarchate supported sport as a way to achieve results through human willpower.<sup>42</sup>

Sambo has benefitted from Putin's personal patronage. The Russian president, who won multiple sambo championships in St Petersburg, has been personally involved in promoting it. The first sambo national championship was organized under his leadership in 2001, and the State Committee for Sport introduced the new discipline of military sambo the following year. Putin also led the launch of the Sambo Wrestling Presidential Cup in 2006. As honorary president of the International Sambo Federation (FIAS), he personally lobbied the International Olympic Committee to recognize sambo as an Olympic sport.<sup>43</sup> So far, Russian efforts have succeeded in getting sambo included in major international competitions, including the European and Asian Games, the Universiade and the World Combat Games.

If sambo is the foremost Russian martial art, judo, too, has been a prestigious and worthy pursuit. Putin, who is said to have practiced judo since he was 11 years old, holds the title of Master of Sports in both judo and sambo, has a black belt in karate and is the honorary president of the

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40. “Systema History”, Systema Hong Kong, <http://systemahongkong.com>.

41. “Pravoslavnoe karate—eto bred?!” [Orthodox karate—is it a delusion?], SuperKarate.ru, <http://superkarate.ru>.

42. “Sportsmeny i Russkaia tserkov' zajmutsia razrabotkoj ideologii sambo” [Athletes and the Russian Church will develop the ideology of sambo], Pravoslavie.ru, 18 March 2010, [www.pravoslavie.ru](http://www.pravoslavie.ru).

43. S Grishin, “Vladimir Putin Calls for Making Every Effort to Have Sambo Recognized as an Olympic Sport”, International Sambo Federation (FIAS), 11 October 2016, [www.sambo-fias.org](http://www.sambo-fias.org).

European Judo Union. This has resulted in what some call “judocracy”: many figures promoted to key state and security positions by Putin have studied martial arts alongside him, a sign of personal loyalty to the president.<sup>44</sup> Oligarch Arkady Rotenberg, his childhood sparring partner, runs Stroygazmontazh, the largest construction company for gas pipelines and electrical power supply lines in Russia; Vasily Shestakov, a judo trainer in St Petersburg who entered politics and helped create the Edinstvo (Unity) party, a forerunner of United Russia, is now a Duma member for Fair Russia; Viktor Zolotov, who served as Putin’s personal bodyguard for 13 years, is a member of the Security Council and was appointed director of the National Guard of Russia in 2016; Igor Sidorkevich was chief of the Main Directorate of the Military Police from 2013 to 2016, and Yuri Trutnev, former minister of natural resources and the environment, co-chairs the Russian Union of Martial Arts.<sup>45</sup>

It was also under Putin’s personal patronage that the International Mixed Martial Arts Federation was created in 2012, the same year that MMA was designated a “national sport” in Russia. The heavyweight boxing icon Fyodor Emelyanenko was appointed to the role of Russian MMA Union president. Held up as a paragon of Russia’s “healthy patriotism”, Emelyanenko, who is close to Putin, became involved in politics and was elected to the Belgorod Regional Duma in 2010 as a United Russia deputy. He is also a member of Russia’s Council of Physical Fitness and Sports and is connected to the rising far-right Rodina ideologist Fyodor Badyuk. More than any other martial arts, MMA clubs are particularly attractive to right-wing groups and amenable to the cultivation of a “white” brand. Examples include several clothing lines, such as Beloyar and White Rex, that insist on their “Slavic style,” signified by the swastika, Orthodox crosses and Aryan/Celtic symbols, and modelled by heavily muscled and tattooed men.<sup>46</sup>

## The bikers network

The third milieu linked to the militia realm is the biker network, of which Putin’s personal biker club, the Night Wolves (*nochnye volki*), is the most infamous representative.<sup>47</sup> In 1989, the Night Wolves formed the first official motorcycle club in the Soviet Union, born of underground

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44. M. Galeotti, “The Rise of the Russian Judocracy”, In *Moscow’s Shadows*, 10 August 2013, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com>.

45. S. Shuster, “Vladimir Putin’s Billionaire Boys Judo Club”, *Time*, 1 March 2011, <http://content.time.com>.

46. “Muzhchinam” [Men], Beloyar, <https://beloyar.net>; White Rex, [www.2yt4u.com](http://www.2yt4u.com).

47. See K. Harris, “Russia’s Fifth Column: The Influence of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 22 March 2018.

subcultures in the early 1980s and officialized during the perestroika years. At that time, the club was working as a security provider at rock concerts, with the result that Russian bikers were known as “*rokery*” in the 1980s. The club’s leader, Aleksandr Zaldostanov (1963)—nicknamed “the surgeon” (*khirurg*) because he is a former facial reconstructive surgeon—discovered Western biker culture while working as a bouncer in West Berlin in the mid-1980s.<sup>48</sup> In the early post-Soviet years, the club diversified its strategies and invested in the new private sector. It rapidly became a successful brand: it runs multiple rock clubs, several tattoo parlors (it was one of the founders of the annual International Moscow Tattoo Convention), some motorcycle repair and custom shops, and its own clothing line, Wolf Wear. Members usually ride Harley-Davidsons—Putin himself has appeared riding one at their rallies—but the club has also developed its own motorbike line in cooperation with the manufacturer IMZ-Ural.

Although born in countercultural circles, the Night Wolves gradually integrated into the establishment, especially after Putin visited the bike club in Sevastopol in 2009 and sympathized with Zaldostanov. They have since succeeded in blending Western biker culture and elements from their original counterculture—for instance, references to Mad Max, which inspired apocalyptic displays at club rallies—with Kremlin ideology. The movement now has 50 chapters all over Russia (as well as some in Europe, discussed below) and approximately 5,000 members. It advances the Kremlin’s main political stance: it portrays the West as Russia’s enemy, denounces its decadent culture and homophilia, and organizes support for pro-natality policies and motorcycle pilgrimages to Orthodox holy sites. Zaldostanov has received honors from Putin himself: he was one of the official torchbearers for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and was awarded the Order of Honor for his role in the patriotic upbringing of the young. In return, he made Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov honorary chief of the Night Wolves for Chechnya.<sup>49</sup>

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis brought the Night Wolves new visibility, as they actively facilitated the annexation of Crimea by patrolling the streets of Simferopol and Sevastopol with *Spetsnaz* units, blockading the main routes into the latter, and participating in attacks on the Strikolkove natural gas facility and the naval headquarters. The small city of Bakhshysarai awarded them a contract for municipal security services and

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48. A. Luhn, “‘The Surgeon’: We Spoke with the Leader of Putin’s Favorite Biker Club, the Night Wolves”, *Vice News*, 25 March 2015, <https://news.vice.com>.

49. G. Tétrault-Farber, “Strongman Leader Kadyrov Named Honorary Chief of Chechen Night Wolves”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 May 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com>.

youth patriotic education.<sup>50</sup> Some Club members later joined the Donbas insurgency; its chapter in Luhansk is considered part of the secessionist republic's ministry of internal affairs.<sup>51</sup> In August 2014, the Night Wolves organized a grandiose musical show in Sevastopol, attended by an estimated 100,000 people and broadcast live on Russian state television, which celebrated the return of Crimea to Russia and the fight against the "fascist junta" in Kyiv. Since then, the show, rich in special and pyrotechnic effects, has been replicated on an annual basis in different cities across Russia. The club also offers biking tours to Berlin on World War II Victory Day, but has regularly been stopped at the borders of Poland and Lithuania. The Night Wolves collaborated with the Orthodox militia (see below) to disrupt the protests against a new statue to Prince Vladimir, erected in Moscow in late 2016. In addition, Zaldostanov, alongside several other politicians and public figures, formed the Anti-Maidan movement, calling for a "witch hunt" against liberals and everything associated with pro-Western values.<sup>52</sup>

Yet while the Night Wolves may claim Putin's personal support, their relationship to the presidential administration appears quite complex and unstable. They began securing presidential grant monies in 2012, receiving about US\$1 million in 2013-2014, but lost financial support in 2017, confirming the flexible and fleeting nature of these kinds of ideological honeymoons.<sup>53</sup> The appointment of "liberal" Sergey Kiriyenko as the presidential administration's first deputy chief of staff in 2016 shifted the pendulum somewhat away from the most conservative/reactionary positions toward more centrist positions. But the torch of ultra-patriotic militia has since then been taken by another powerful actor, the Russian Orthodox Church.

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50. More details in M.A. Lauder, "Wolves of the Russian Spring: An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government", *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2018, [www.journal.forces.gc.ca](http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca).

51. J. Losh, "Putin's Angels: The Bikers Battling for Russia in Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 29 January 2016, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

52. T. Parfitt, "Putin's Outrider: 'The Surgeon' Vows to Quell Anti-Kremlin Dissent", *The Telegraph*, 24 March 2015, [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk).

53. M. Bennetts, "Putin's Grants to 'Foreign Agents' Signal Shift away from Hard-Line Domestic Policies", *The Washington Times*, 3 August 2017, [www.washingtontimes.com](http://www.washingtontimes.com).

# The Dangerous Shift to Vigilantism: Orthodox Militias

The gap between militia and vigilantism is a tiny one. Many Russian far-right groups dream of being vigilantes, yet most have never been sufficiently organized or enjoyed the strong-enough protection of a patron to act that way. With the exception of the Cossacks and Barkashov's RNE during the peak of its popularity in the mid-1990s, no other movement has been able to patrol the streets in the name of "law and order". It is only more recently, in the 2010s, that we have seen the emergence of a better-structured vigilantism trend. This can be explained by the change of context of Putin's third term (2012-2018) and the window opened by the authorities for grassroots ultraconservative groups to occupy the public space.

In 2012, just after the Pussy Riot incident, leading Church figures such as Father Vsevolod Chaplin publicly supported the proposal to create an Orthodox militia that would secure religious sites from blasphemous actions.<sup>54</sup> The proposal came from a radical groupuscule, Holy Rus (*Sviataia Rus*), led by Ivan Otrakovsky, which claimed to already have around 100 followers ready to patrol to prevent desecration of churches.<sup>55</sup> One year later, the Patriarchate took a step toward institutionalizing its own Orthodox militia, the Sorok Sorokov. Claiming 200 active members and around 10,000 supporters,<sup>56</sup> Sorok Sorokov calls for Russia's second Christianization (*utoroe kreshchenie*) and supports the "Programma 200" project, which aims to construct 200 new churches in Moscow and organizes prayer vigils at the proposed sites. Born as a response to the Pussy Riot incident, it uses the neologism "churchophobia" (*khramofobiia*) to denounce the lack of popular respect for religious symbols, with the stated goal of defending Orthodox churches and, more generally, reintroducing the Church's values into everyday life.

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54. J. Earle, "Orthodox Clergyman Wants Guards at Holy Sites", *The Moscow Times*, 24 August 2012, <https://themoscowtimes.com>.

55. A. Lobzina, "Orthodox Activists Create Moscow Patrol Squads", *The Moscow News*, 22 August 2012, <http://themoscownews.com>.

56. D. Volchek, "Gvardejtsy RPTs" [ROC guards], Radio Svoboda, 29 September 2017, [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org).

Sorok Sorokov is a particularly well-connected movement, nurtured from inside the Patriarchate and with the support of influential ideological figures. One of them is Bishop Tikhon Shevkunov (1958), rumored to be Putin's confessor, closely connected to the security services, and at the forefront of the Church's ideological engagement. The movement is also supported by the Moscow municipality, which has been linked to the Church since the era of mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Its members meet regularly with Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, who leads the Patriarchate's Commission for Family, Motherhood and Childhood,<sup>57</sup> and they have direct access to Patriarch Kirill. The latter personally received Sorok Sorokov's leader, Andrey Kormukhin (1970), for his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday, and alluded to the group when he mentioned the "voluntary brigades" that accompany him during his travels.<sup>58</sup> Another feature of the movement is the use of champion athletes to advocate for Orthodoxy. Kormukhin and Fyodor Emelyanenko are good friends, and the movement is also associated with boxing champions Vladimir Nosov and David Arustamian, powerlifting champion Yuri Vartabedian and world karate champion Sergey Fedotkin.<sup>59</sup> The links between the martial arts realm and the Church have thus been reinforced and institutionalized with Sorok Sorokov.

The movement's name, based on an old Russian saying that Moscow has "forty times forty" churches,<sup>60</sup> is abbreviated in Russian as SS, which is probably no coincidence. The Communist Party, one of its main targets, has accused Sorok Sorokov of being neo-Nazi.<sup>61</sup> All members wear red T-shirts bearing the movement's symbol, a traditional Russian knight brandishing a sword, with Orthodox churches in the background and the slogan "Fight for Life" (*Bitva za zhizn'*). The movement's website and social media combine icons and paintings of "traditional" Tsarist Russia with pictures of muscled and tattooed athletes, some with swastikas or symbols borrowed from the Ku Klux Klan. Over time, the movement began to recruit soccer fans, including some heroes of the soccer fan culture of the

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57. D. Turovskij, "Stroiteli oflajn-gosudarstva: Daniil Turovskij rasskazyvaet o pravoslavnom dvizhenii 'Sorok sorokov'" [Builders of the offline state: Daniel Turovsky talks about the Orthodox movement "Sorok Sorokov"], *Meduza*, 22 September 2015, <https://meduza.io>.

58. A. Buribaev, "Pravoslavie ili natsizm: sviazany li aktivisty RPTs s pravoradikalami?" [Orthodoxy or Nazism: are ROC activists connected with right-wing radicals?], *Medialeaks*, 11 August 2015, <http://medialeaks.ru>.

59. V. Emel'ianov and A. Puchugin, "'Pravoslavie i sport': Svetlyj vecher s Vladimirom Nosovym" ["Orthodoxy and sport": a bright evening with Vladimir Nosov], *Vera—Svetloe Radio*, 10 September 2015, <http://radiovera.ru>.

60. A. Gumerov (Hieromonk Iov), "Chto oznachaet vyrazhenie 'sorok sorokov'?" [What does the expression "sorok sorokov" mean?], *Pravoslavie.ru*, 8 December 2009, [www.pravoslavie.ru](http://www.pravoslavie.ru).

61. "Deputat Rashkin prizval likvidirovat' dvizhenie 'Sorok sorokov'" [Deputy Rashkin calls for the liquidation of the "Sorok Sorokov" movement], *Parlamentskaia Gazeta* (publication of the Russian Federal Assembly), 21 August 2015, [www.pnp.ru](http://www.pnp.ru).



Spartak club, such as Vasilii Stepanov, nicknamed “the killer”, and Ivan Katanayev. The latter played an important role in helping the presidential administration take control of soccer violence and redirect those energies into pro-presidential youth movements. In 2007, he became one of the main founders of the Pan-Russian Union of Soccer Fan Clubs, and now directs soccer fans to Sorok Sorokov.

The movement has developed side projects such as humanitarian aid to Donbas, religious tourism and diverse charitable activities. It invited young men to harmoniously combine their faith and male identity by entering the priesthood in the army, and organizes an annual sports fair, “Orthodoxy and Sport”, in Kolomenskoye park that gathers around 10,000 participants. The movement, initially reserved for men, has also opened a sorority. Sorok Sorokov openly engaged in vigilantism when it began fighting homosexuality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, and disrupting gay-pride parades.<sup>62</sup> It also accuses liberals, Communists and other leftist groups of furthering the destruction of religious values.<sup>63</sup> In 2016, it attacked secular activists protesting against the construction of a new church in Torfyanka park in Moscow and beat several peaceful protesters.<sup>64</sup>

The rise of the Orthodox militia accelerated in 2017 around the film *Matilda*, which described the—historically documented—love story between the young Nicholas II, still only tsarevich, and the ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska. The last Romanov emperor was canonized in 2000, since which time he has increasingly been an object of worship among proponents of political orthodoxy and groups nostalgic for Tsarist Russia.<sup>65</sup> However, no-one was probably prepared for the film to prompt such reactions. A henceforth unknown group calling itself “Christian State-Holy Russia” (*Khristianskoe gosudarstvo-Sviataia Rus'*) threatened to commit violent acts if the film was released, and indeed threw petrol bombs at the building housing film director Aleksei Uchitel's studio. Across Russia, screenings of the film sparked violence: two cars were set on fire outside the office of the director's lawyer in Moscow, the perpetrators leaving behind fliers reading “Burn for Matilda”, and in Yekaterinburg a

62. D. Turovskij, “Stroiteli oflajn-gosudarstva”, *op. cit.*

63. A. Rudoj, “Sorok Sorokov': Boevye otriady RPTs” [Sorok Sorokov: the fighting detachments of the ROC], *Vestnik Buri*, 14 August 2015, <http://vestnikburi.com>.

64. “Zashchitnikov ‘Torfiianki’ obviniaiat v oskorblenii chuvstv veruiushchikh” [“Torfiianka” defenders accused of insulting the feelings of believers], Radio Svoboda, 14 November 2016, [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org); “V parke ‘Torfiianka’ v Moskve osvitali pravoslavnykh aktivistov” [Orthodox activists baptized in ‘Torfiianka’ park in Moscow], Radio Svoboda, 13 February 2016, [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org).

65. K. Rousselet, “Constructing Moralities around the Tsarist Family,” in J. Zigon (ed.), *Multiple Moralities and Religions in Post-Soviet Russia*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2011, pp. 146-167.

man was arrested after crashing his Jeep into a theater showing the film. Several calls about bomb threats that resulted in the evacuation of schools and commercial malls may have been organized by the group, stated its leader, Aleksandr Kalinin. Yet, according to Meduza, the organization, which claims 300 members, does not really exist and comprises only Kalinin and some of his friends.<sup>66</sup> Sorok Sorokov, too, organized prayer seating in the streets near theaters showing the film to protest against its release, bringing together up to 10,000 people in these non-violent demonstrations.

The actions around Matilda have confirmed the existence of a “militant Orthodoxy” (*boevoe pravoslavie*) ready to cross the threshold and engage in violent action.<sup>67</sup> This fundamentalist fringe is under close surveillance by the security services; its most radical figures have been arrested and the most extreme groups shut down. Yet Sorok Sorokov, thanks to its patrons, is entirely integrated into the regime’s ecosystem—Kormukhin even participated in some discussions on Christian values at the Duma in 2017—and serves as a mediator between the radical fundamentalist fringe and the Patriarchate establishment without fear of state organs. More broadly, the *tsarebozhniki*—i.e. those fervent believers in the sacredness of the tsar Nicholas II and his family, and militantly in favor of political rehabilitation of tsarism—have been able to express themselves quite openly, even inside state institutions such as the Duma, for instance via their leading figure, Natalia Poklonskaya, new muse of Russia’s monarchist movement.<sup>68</sup>

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66. “‘Khristianskogo gosudarstva’ ne sushchestvuet. No za nim, vozmozhno, stoit FSB. ‘Meduza’ vyiasnila, otkuda vzialis’ pravoslavnye radikaly i cho pro nikh dumaiut v RPTs” [There is no “Christian state”. But behind it, perhaps, is the FSB. “Meduza” found out where the Orthodox radicals came from and what they think about them in the ROC], Meduza, 20 September 2017, <https://meduza.io>. See also V. Rozanskij, “Aleksandr Kalinin, the War Against ‘Matilda’ and Putin”, AsiaNews, 22 September 2017, [www.asianews.it](http://www.asianews.it).

67. M. Engström, “Religious Terror in Modern Russia”, The Intersection Project, 18 October 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu> (currently unavailable).

68. A. Soldatov, “Vosstanie ‘sekty tsarebozhnikov’, otets Sergij (v miru Nikolaj Romanov) i Poklonskaia” [The uprising of the “tsarist sect”, Father Sergius (in real life Nikolay Romanov) and Poklonskaya], *Novaia Gazeta*, 15 August 2017, [www.novayagazeta.ru](http://www.novayagazeta.ru).

# New Troops for Hybrid Politics Abroad

The projection of Russia's power abroad, especially in Europe, has been reactivated since the mid-2000s, and accelerated dramatically in the 2010s through a combination of supporting new political allies in European countries, developing media influence to secure Russia's master narrative, and allowing criminal schemes—and therefore, indirectly, the militia realm—to act as proxies of power.<sup>69</sup>

The main instance of the use of militia groups as tools for Russia's hybrid politics abroad is, obviously, the Donbas insurgency. An estimated 12,000-15,000 Russian civilians volunteered for the conflict (see András Rácz's calculations using different methods<sup>70</sup>) as well as about 1,000 to 2,000 foreign (neither Russian nor Ukrainian) fighters. Almost all Russian far-right youth groups sent volunteer fighters: the Eurasianist Union of Youth, those claiming links to Barkashov's RNE, skinhead groups like Russkie and Restruk, etc.<sup>71</sup> One of the groups that gained in visibility due to the conflict is the Russian Imperial Movement, which raised its profile on the nationalist landscape by forming two brigades of volunteers: Reserve (*Rezerv*) and then Imperial Legion (IL). Benefitting from the rising legitimacy of monarchist activism, RID has been cooperating with some ultra-radical movements that have emerged from the Donbas war theatre, such as Svetlaia Rus' and E.N.O.T.

The Donbas insurgency and its famous warlords, such as Igor Strelkov, contributed to the romanticizing of warfare. However, many volunteer fighters were also closer to an openly fascist interpretation of the insurrection, presenting it as a Russian Spring (*rusaskaia vesna*), a totalitarian revolution that would transform society, overthrow current regimes and start over with a *tabula rasa*. They sublimated violence, filling the Russian nationalist Internet and social-media world with images of volunteers in khaki uniforms, proudly displaying their weapons and posing

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69. M. Galeotti, "Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe", *Policy Brief*, No. 208, European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2017, [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu).

70. A. Rácz, "The Elephant in the Room: Russian Foreign Fighters in Ukraine", in K. Rekaewek (ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, Amsterdam, ISO Press, 2017, pp. 60-73.

71. N. Yudina and A. Verkhovsky, "Russian Nationalist Veterans of the Donbas War", *Nationalities Papers* (forthcoming).

in macho ways around tanks or destroyed military equipment. Many of the Donbas fighter brigades displayed fascist symbols, offering all possible variations of the swastika.<sup>72</sup> Yet the utopia of Novorossiia has now disappeared. The Kremlin retook control of the insurgency in summer 2014 and progressively pushed out the volunteer fighters, who had largely left the conflict zone by the end of 2016.<sup>73</sup>

As studied by Sarah Fainberg, several volunteer fighters from this militia realm—either from among the Cossacks, from military training clubs or from far-right groups such as RNE, Rusich and E.N.O.T.—moved from Donbas to Syria, or at least tried to do so, but their number seems to be minimal and their training not up to the required level.<sup>74</sup> In the sector of professionalized private military companies that can be hired as “mercenaries” in war theatres, few can reach the level of professionalism required, for instance, to enter the Wagner group. These militia groups are better skilled for Russia’s soft-power influence in Europe. They allow for easy outsourcing of connecting with movements sympathetic to Russia, mostly on the far right of the political landscape, and cheap intelligence-gathering. These new proxies for hybrid warfare can be divided into several categories.

The first is Russian nationalist connections, which are not directly supervised by any state structures and operate thanks to pan-European far-right, often white supremacist, networks. In 2014, for instance, the British neo-Nazi Sigurd Legion—Sigurd was the pseudonym used by Anders Breivik—trained young people in paramilitary actions with the supervision of the Russian group White Rex, led by Denis Nikitin. Nikitin is an MMA champion who organizes MMA tournaments in Russia and Europe. He has also developed commercial activities on the side, such as the White Rex clothing brand. Before coming to the UK, the group is said to have organized an MMA competition in Rome with Nazi war criminal and former SS officer Erich Priebke as the guest of honor.<sup>75</sup> White Rex is also considered responsible for the eruption of violence among British, French and Russian soccer fans in Marseille during the 2016 European

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72. M. Laruelle, “The Three Colors of Novorossiia, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis”, Vol. 32, No. 1, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2016.

73. M. Laruelle, “Back from Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Re-Invent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiia Russia”, *Nationalities Papers* (forthcoming).

74. S. Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 105, 2017, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

75. A. Shekhovtsov, “Russian Extreme Right White Rex Organisation Engaged in Training of British Neo-Nazi Thugs”, Anton Shekhovtsov (blog), 10 November 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com>.

Championship.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, it was through far-right networks that the two Swedish members of the neo-Nazi Northern Resistance Movement (NMR) charged with the Gothenburg explosions of 2017, directed against an asylum-seeker center, received training: they apparently participated in a week-long military training course organized by Gariev's Russian Imperial Movement in St Petersburg.<sup>77</sup> Some Russian groups also seem to have offered support in training a Bosnian Serb radical militia.<sup>78</sup> In summer 2018, a Youth Patriotic Camp organized for youth from Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina in Zlatibor by a Serbian war veterans association and the Russian E.N.O.T. got closed down by the authorities for having trained minors to use weapons.<sup>79</sup>

If these pan-European connections are often hyped by the media, they are in reality limited to fringe groups and belong to the realm of ultra-radicalism. A second category, much more powerful and better connected to state organs, is related to the martial arts and vigilante groups mentioned above. One of the central elements of this realm abroad is the Sistema network, which many European security services consider an outsourced platform for the GRU.<sup>80</sup> To wit, one of its most prominent sections, Sistema Ryabko, claims 152 training centers, of which 55 are said to be in Europe, with branches in Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia and Switzerland.<sup>81</sup>

Another Sistema branch seems to be led by Vadim Starov, a former GRU member, now running Sistema training in Italy, Greece and Cyprus.<sup>82</sup> Its instructors travel regularly abroad: in 2018 alone, they held seminars in France (Nantes), Germany, Ireland, Italy, Slovakia and Poland, as well as Japan and Latin America. At least one of the Sistema schools in Germany, Sistema Wolf, is directly connected to the Night Wolves, but dozens of other schools also seem to operate in the country, mostly thanks to the

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76. T. Porter, "Euro 2016: Top Russian Ultra Group Trained British Neo-Nazis", *International Business Times*, 20 June 2016, [www.ibtimes.co.uk](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk).

77. J. L. Feder, E. Mannheimer, and J. Lytvynenko, "These Swedish Nazis Trained in Russia Before Bombing a Center For Asylum Seekers", *Buzzfeed*, 22 July 2017, [www.buzzfeednews.com](http://www.buzzfeednews.com).

78. M. Lakic and D. Kovacevic, "Russia, Bosnian Serbs, Scorn 'Paramilitary Unit' Claims", *Balkan Insight*, 13 January 2018, [www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com).

79. "Serbian Police Close Paramilitary Youth Camp Run By Ultranationalists, Russian Group", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 17 August 2018, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

80. J. Hufelschulte, "Würgen, schlagen, töten lernen" [Learning to choke, beat and kill], *Focus*, No. 22, 2014, [www.focus.de](http://www.focus.de).

81. Sistema Ryabko Moscow Headquarters, [www.systemaryabko.com](http://www.systemaryabko.com).

82. A. Rettman, "Fight Club: Russian Spies Seek EU Recruits", *EU Observer*, 23 May 2017, <https://euobserver.com>, E. Schuhmann, "Putins Geheimtruppe wartet auf ein Signal" [Putin's secret troops are waiting for a signal], *Deutsche Welle*, 18 April 2016, [www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com), J. Hufelschulte, "Würgen, schlagen, töten lernen", *op.cit.*

Russian-speaking diaspora.<sup>83</sup> They probably function like a kind of network of “sleeper cells” that could be activated if needed to help identify European sympathizers.

The Night Wolves, too, opened several chapters abroad<sup>84</sup>: in the post-Soviet space (in Ukraine, Latvia and Belarus) as well as in Central Europe and the Balkans (Romania, Slovakia—where the president publicly expressed concerns<sup>85</sup>—Serbia, Macedonia and Hungary). In 2018, the group undertook a heavily publicized “Russian Balkans” trip throughout the region.<sup>86</sup> In Western Europe, the group’s only chapter to date seems to be in Berlin; it also has a mixed brand, Russlanddeutsche Wölfe (Russian-German Wolves), based in Ludwigsburg. Sorok Sorokov has likewise developed some visibility in Europe: it claims to have branches in Serbia and Montenegro, but it seems that it is with Austria that the links are the most developed, including by partnering with the pro-Kremlin Suworov Institute based in Vienna.<sup>87</sup>

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83. D. Chmelnizki, “Martial Arts Schools Sistema”, translated by K. Harris (currently unavailable online).

84. W. Wright, “The Rise of Russia’s Night Wolves”, *Russia!*, 14 July 2018, <http://readrussia.com>.

85. “Slovak President Calls Local Russian Night Wolves Chapter Security Risk”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 July 2018, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

86. “Putin’s Night Wolves Landed in Belgrade and—Disappeared: We Reveal Their Mysterious Mission, Here’s the Entire Planned Route (MAP)”, *Telegraf*, 20 March 2018, [www.telegraf.rs](http://www.telegraf.rs).

87. “Jugendorganisation 40×40” [Youth organisation 40 x 40], Suworow Institute, [www.suworow.at](http://www.suworow.at).

## Conclusion

A sociology of the militia subculture is still to be written. It is not a marginal one: it groups several hundred thousand activists—in the sense of people participating in one form or another in paramilitary activities—and some millions of supporters, constituting one of the cores of the popular support for the regime.

The militia phenomenon has benefitted from several overlapping political and cultural trends: the revival of the military as the main forum for displaying patriotism; grassroots and state-sponsored projects for bringing up young people; radical political groups preparing for urban warfare; the growing involvement of the Church in the paramilitary sector, and the fashion for a rugged masculinity expressed through martial arts. These diverging ecosystems may overlap—many former military men manage paramilitary youth clubs and practice some martial arts in their Russian or Asian iterations—but they also remain distinct. The majority of martial arts clubs have no other agenda than to care for Russian youth physically and mentally; they typically do not advance any ideological program that could be linked to the radical right.

This militia subculture calls, above all, for service to the state and sacrifice to the nation. Many members of military-patriotic clubs express only narratives of defense, never of aggression or of vigilantism: their goal is to train those who desire to learn, without any impact on the rest of society. Yet at least two new contexts have gradually impacted their current stance and pushed for a more engaged and assertive posture. The first is the 2014 Ukrainian conflict, which presented the opportunity to update the powerful metaphor of World War II *partizany*, blending it with a glamorized gang culture, and to attract young people on a quest for personal significance through war experience. The second change in context has been the rise—quite unexpected by the authorities—of Orthodox fundamentalism, which today constitutes the main channel for transforming militia into vigilantes. Orthodox fundamentalists occupy public spaces, preach moral conservatism and have begun to violently enforce their values against those who express other views. The Sorok Sorokov, which benefits from the Church's protection, channels youth potentially attracted to skinhead groups or soccer hooliganism into its structures, and also pushes Orthodox sympathizers toward a more engaged role. The Night Wolves exemplify the business component of this militia

realm, offering security training as well as running security agencies that provide armed and unarmed protection of premises, and the installation and monitoring of tracking systems.

They all represent the tip of the iceberg of a growing yet little recognized phenomenon: Russian political figures and MPs who, following the example of the United States, call for liberalizing gun-control laws and protecting Russian citizens' right to defend themselves. This trend is not only apparent among the most politically conservative groups: Putin's main opponent, Alexei Navalny, has been one of these pro-gun voices.

At home, the militia realm allows for a relatively flexible interaction between state organs, grassroots illiberal activism and criminal schemes, with some charitable activities on the side that provide social legitimacy. Abroad, the Kremlin plays through it one of its major hybrid warfare cards, outsourcing activities traditionally conducted by intelligence entities and allowing for plausible deniability. Russia can no longer afford to be a great power in the sense of wielding economic strength or military might far away from home. The contraction of the state budget and public spending is publicly recognized by the government; it has no choice but to deploy a low-cost toolkit for greatpowerness, and hybrid war is one of these tools.

The militia realm thus seems destined to play a growing role in Russia's law-enforcement, military and intelligence culture both at home and abroad. Its role is multi-layered: at a minimum, it fosters social consensus around the regime and its values, but it also secures access for the power ministries to several hundreds of thousands of patriotic-minded and trained citizens potentially ready to be recruited. They could be increasingly used as an outsourced tool for repressing political opposition<sup>88</sup> and performing "hybrid" duties abroad, as well as a coercive force serving the power ministries against civilian authorities in the case of both of them having conflicting interests.

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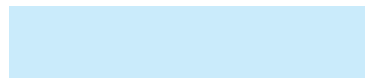
88. For instance, the patriotic movement SERB—a far-right group born among Russian nationalists in Ukraine—physically assaulted Alexey Navalny in 2017. See I. Zotov, "Otkuda v Rossii vziasia SERB" [Where did SERB come from in Russia?], *Novye Izvestia*, 13 May 2017, <https://newizv.ru>.



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