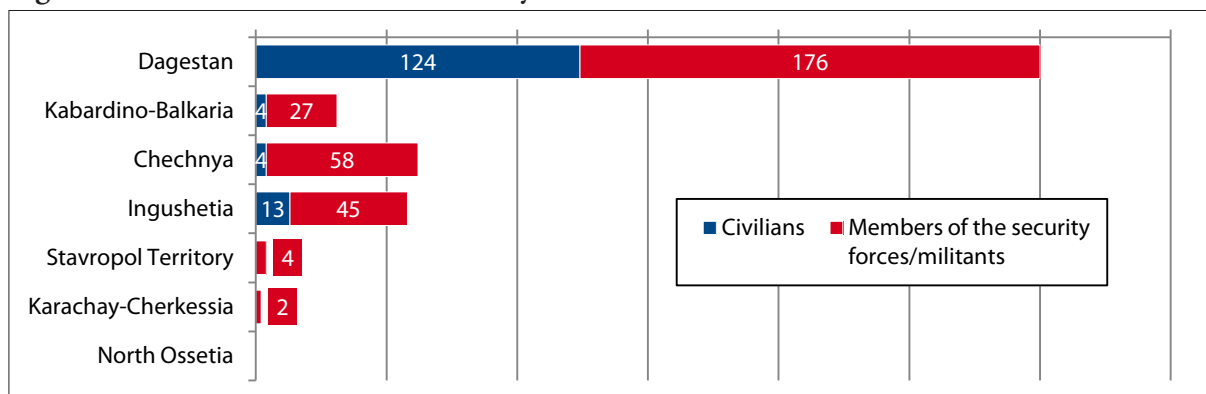


Figure 3: Total Numbers of Wounded by Status

Total number of wounded: 457; total number of civilians wounded: 145; total number of members of the security forces and militants wounded: 312.

Source: <<http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/27109/>>

ANALYSIS

Russian Cossacks in Service of the Kremlin: Recent Developments and Lessons from Ukraine

By Tomáš Baranec, Tbilisi

Abstract

As a result of the February 2014 Cossack militia attack on Pussy Riot's punk singers during their protest action at the Sochi Olympics, Russian Cossacks finally attracted the attention of the Western media. Despite this exceptional coverage, the phenomenon of the Cossacks as a constantly rising and well organized government-backed group remains largely unknown to Western readers. Nevertheless, Cossacks registered for state service are starting to play an increasingly significant role in both Russian domestic and foreign policies; in fact they have already become a symbol and backbone of Putin's new traditionalist ideology. This article seeks to establish a basic understanding of this new and dynamic phenomenon. The process is the result of both spontaneous developments and a top-down Kremlin policy. Understanding how the government is using the Cossacks helps us outline the possible strategy behind the rise of the Cossacks and the potential consequences of this development.

Cossacks as an Unbound Force and Cossacks as Servants to the Throne

Although the idea of Cossacks serving the Russian state re-emerged in 1994 under Yeltsin when the government adopted a "State Policy Concept regarding the Cossacks," it would be a mistake to assume that the reappearance of the Cossack hosts, which had largely been destroyed by Bolshevik persecutions, was a top-down process. In fact, Yeltsin's aim was not to support the rise of the Cossacks but rather to tame their sharp upsurge through legislative measures and by creating official agencies, such as the General Director-

ate of Cossack Troops under the aegis of the Russian Federation President.

As early as 1990, representatives of spontaneously reestablished Cossack communities throughout Russia organized a Big Cossack Circle¹ in Moscow. This gathering resulted in the formation of the Congress of the Union of Cossacks of Russia with its own constitution and the emergence of the Council of Atamans and Ataman government as major organs of the Union, abso-

¹ The Cossack Circle was traditionally the highest organ of Cossack self-government.

lutely independent of the government in the Kremlin. A year later, in the environment of chaos accompanying the disintegration of the Soviet Union, several Cossack autonomous republics spontaneously proclaimed their existence in South Russia. As an addition, self-proclaimed Cossack paramilitary “police” groups appeared in some of these regions, fighting minor criminality with their fists and whips, often targeting “people of Caucasian appearance.” Under these circumstances, Yeltsin’s administration had no choice but to legislatively regulate the already existing, well-organized and, in some ways, dangerous Cossack movement rather than actually supporting its rise. And indeed, between 1996 and 1998, 17 Cossack hosts were established throughout Russia (under the terms outlined by Yeltsin’s government), to replace many heterogeneous, chaotic and often potentially threatening groups. Cossacks as a potentially rebellious independent force were effectively neutralized by this time, without any suppression, but through the application of legislative and bureaucratic tools.

However, the existing status quo was undermined during Vladimir Putin’s second term, when in 2005 he introduced the law “On the State Service of Russian Cossacks.” This legislation created the legal basis for Cossacks who were willing to enter state service to do so officially, thus dividing Russian Cossackdom into groups which were either registered under the direct control of the government or un-registered and ruled by their own independent decision-making bodies. In fact, twelve of the sixteen laws, government decrees or amendments involving Cossacks that were adopted during the past 20 years were passed after Putin’s ascent to power.

Nevertheless, the sharp rise of organised Cossackdom began during Putin’s third term in office as president, following the massive demonstrations in 2012. In the last two years, official Cossack militias started to patrol several regions, especially in turbulent Southern Russia, new cadet schools are being opened, and even a Cossack University is supposed to be established as part of Moscow State University. As the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Nikolai Makarov stated, the Kremlin also plans to create four new, solely Cossack brigades within the Russian army. Simultaneously, voices are rising to resettle Cossacks from Kazakhstan to “problematic areas” of the North Caucasus, potentially reviving the old Tsarist policy of Cossacks conquering borderlands with sword and plough. Taking into account the fact that the Kremlin’s main policy toward the Cossacks for more than one decade had been to tame their often exploding activism, one can wonder what is the reason for such a rapid change in attitude. The only way to at least partially explain Putin’s intentions is to analyse the ways Cossack services have been used in the last two years.

Cossack Whip

Probably the most visible role for the registered Cossacks is their assistance with suppressing mass displays of discontent with Kremlin policies and their emblematic role as symbols and guardians of Putin’s traditionalistic policies. The first signs of this role appeared in connection with the Olympic Games in Sochi. In the shadow of the terrorist threat that occupied a big part of the police and army presence, registered Cossacks were chosen to suppress expected demonstrations by autochthonous Circassians and anti-government activists in Sochi. This role was well illustrated during the scandal surrounding the Cossack patrol’s use of whips against members of Pussy Riot.

Another role for registered Cossacks is the patriotic education of youth, which is seen most vividly in the ever-growing number of Cossack cadet schools all over Russia. These institutions usually welcome children from problematic families, are equipped much better than average Russian schools, and provide their students with hours of martial arts education, military training and lessons in Russian patriotism.² Thus groups of young men are being educated in line with the official state ideology to become the future military and police elite of the state.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is attempting to strengthen conservative tendencies among registered Cossacks, bringing them even more in line with the official ideology. Currently, the church works as the state’s ally, especially after the head of the Synodic Committee for Cooperation with the Cossacks of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk Kirill introduced “the five commandments of Cossacks” to enhance the spiritual life of Cossacks on December 2013.

Signs of collaboration between registered Cossacks and the government appear not only in the sphere of ideology and spirituality, but also in actual politics. Vyacheslav Pilipenko, who was an aide to Alexander Khloponin, former envoy of the President for the North Caucasus Federal District, was chosen to be the Terek Cossacks’ new ataman. At the same time, Pilipenko retained his government position as Khloponin’s aide. Through this dual appointment, the state has essentially taken over the Terek Cossacks and the Terek Cossacks boosted their influence on developments in the volatile North Caucasus. At this moment registered Cossacks present a force that can become not just a symbol of the Kremlin’s neo-conservatism, but also a tool

2 For more detailed information on Cossack Kadet schools see: Marie Jégo, “Cossack Cadets fill a gap in Russia’s sense of security and patriotism,” *Guardian weekly*, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/26/russia-cossacks-cadets-volgograd>>, (accessed: 5 June 2014)

of repression against those who openly protest against current state policies.

The rise of the registered Cossacks appears to be also tightly linked with the failure of the Kremlin's brief attempt to appease the North Caucasus by means of soft power and economic development. This short-lived policy officially ended with the recent removal of Khloponin as Putin's representative to the North Caucasus and his replacement by Sergei Alimovich Melikov, who has a strong military background.

Meanwhile the continuing outflow of the Slavic population from the region weakens the Kremlin's grasp not just on the North Caucasus republics, but also on Krasnodar and Stavropol kraia, where regions of compact settlement by Caucasus peoples have started to appear. In this respect, Krasnodar Krai Governor Alexander Tkachev outlined the role of the Cossacks in August 2012 when he claimed that the newly established Cossack patrols "would specifically harass newcomers from the North Caucasus and other non-Russians in Krasnodar in order to pressure them to leave the region."³ A similar pattern was later applied in the neighbouring Stavropol Krai, where the already-existing Cossack paramilitary groups, infamous for many incidents in which they harassed Dagestani newcomers, received legal status and state funds.

Likewise, policies appeared to attract Cossacks to state service by the promise of free land, such as in the case of Kabardino-Balkaria in 2011, despite the fact that precious arable soil remains a constant issue of conflict in the North Caucasus. Following Patriarch Kirill's public support for the plans of Stavropol governor Valery Zerenkov to resettle the Semirechensk Cossacks from Kyrgyzstan to the North Caucasus beginning in December 2013, the overall set of policies started to show features of a broader strategy toward the region. It appears that Cossacks should bolster the old policy of using hard power to pacify the North Caucasus, following the failure of the effort to apply soft power in recent years.

Cossacks and Ukraine

The most recent role for Cossacks with which Putin appears to be flirting is linked to Russia's foreign policy toward its neighbours. This strategy was foreshadowed in the early 1990s when volunteer Cossack brigades helped separatists in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Today Cossacks appear to be a tool to preserve and increase the Kremlin's influence over

these territories. It is hard to assess the exact number of Cossacks in Abkhazia, but during the special operation in the Georgian-settled Gali region of Abkhazia in 2004, reportedly 500 Cossack militants participated. In South Ossetia, President Eduard Kokoiti even proposed the provision of land for Cossacks in the territory of the Tskhinval(i) region. Cossacks also took an active role in the 2008 Russian–Georgian war, according to residents of various villages affected by this conflict. They could not explain what role the Cossacks played in the campaign, but several of them claimed that Russian soldiers were distinguished between regular servicemen and Cossacks while residing in these villages.

Based on the case of the on-going Ukrainian crisis, we can observe three ways (or even steps) in which the Kremlin is using Cossacks as a tool of foreign policy regarding its neighbor. First is the fabrication of a claim on Ukrainian territory voiced by the Cossacks. By late February and early March, three demonstrations driven by Cossacks demanding support for Russian speaking minorities in Ukraine were organized in Rostov, Stavropol and Krasnodar regions. They were followed by a delegation of Crimean Cossacks to their brethren asking for support.

Second, simultaneously, Cossack groups in Crimea and eastern Ukraine turned into engines of unrest. In late February, local Cossacks occupied the town hall in Feodosia and then in early March tried to block and disarm marines of the Ukrainian army sent to the city. Meanwhile in Donetsk, local Cossacks were organizing Cossack patrols and arming themselves for the anticipated arrival of Ukrainian radicals. Based on field information provided by journalists working in areas controlled by separatists, many of the local Cossacks participated actively in battles on the side of separatists, expecting to be later integrated into a Russian Cossack register and to receive all the advantages it provides. Needless to say, no such perks are provided by Kiev.

Third, once armed conflict broke out, well-armed and trained Cossack volunteers from south Russia started to strengthen the ranks of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine as well. One of them is Wolves' Hundred⁴, members of which are often registered Cossacks in Russia. These groups consist of Russian citizens fighting in eastern Ukraine for the Kremlin's interests, even though without any evincible link to the Russian state. And still, if they were there against the Kremlin's will, militias such as Wolves' Hundred could easily be

3 For more detailed account on Tkachev's speech see: "Rech' gubernatora Kubani o kazach'ei policii, migrantakh i sud'bah Rodiny (polnyj tekst i audio)," Yuga.ru, <<http://www.yuga.ru/articles/society/6390.html>>, (accessed: 9. 6. 2014).

4 For more detailed information on Wolves' Hundred see: Simon Shuster, "Meet the Cossack 'Wolves' Doing Russia's Dirty Work in Ukraine," Time, <<http://time.com/95898/wolves-hundred-ukraine-russia-cossack/>>, (accessed: 10. 6. 2014)

punished based on a legal amendment against “participating in armed formations on the territory of a foreign state” that was recently passed as a reaction to the increasing number of Russian citizens fighting in Syria on the side of the rebels.

Based on the above analysis, we can identify three main ways in which the Kremlin has been using registered Cossacks since 2012, namely: one, as a symbol and guardians of the traditionalistic policies adopted by Putin during his third term; two, as a colonizing, suppressive force to tame the restless North Caucasus; and three, as an expansionist tool toward the “near abroad.”

Conclusion: Double-edged Shashka⁵

Registered Cossackdom provides Vladimir Putin with a multifunctional tool that may be wielded on domestic issues as well as abroad. However, Russian Cossacks present an unbridled and heterogeneous force that can turn against the Kremlin. Support for registered Cossacks, especially in South Russia, will inevitably increase the level of discontent among native Caucasian nations. Under the current design, registered Cossacks are being used as tools of harassment against the native population, which (as Krasnodar Governor Tkachev claimed) ought to be their main purpose. The feeling of powerlessness against the state-backed Cossack militias may lead to an ethnic and clan mobilization on the side of the native populations and their further alienation from the central government. These tendencies will be accelerated even more if the plans for Cossack colonization of the region are fulfilled.

About the Author

Tomáš Baranec is a graduate of Charles University in Prague. His research interests include nationalism and factors of ethnic conflicts and separatism in the Caucasus.

Meanwhile, the minds of registered Cossacks are often being poisoned against Caucasians by local politicians. One prominent example is the case of Deputy Mayor of Novochoerkassk Vladislav Zhuravlev, who was sentenced for fomenting interethnic animosity at a gathering of Cossacks in the stanitsa of Sredniaya. By unilaterally supporting the rise of the Cossacks, the Kremlin is launching a chain of ethnic mobilizations among native populations throughout the North Caucasus.

Russian Cossackdom is not limited to Cossacks who are registered for state service. Most Russian Cossacks remain out of state service, jealously guarding their independent structures and obeying their own Atamans. These Cossacks are characterized by the ability to self-organize and mobilize and by their own independent power structures. Unlike registered Cossacks, they are often less interested in state ideology, but are more active in local issues. These concerns often put them in conflict with regional governments and indirectly with the Kremlin itself. Registered Cossacks could revolt as well. Such was the case with the Novoalexandrovsk Cossacks from the Terek Army, who in reaction to what they believed was the politically motivated murder of their ataman Khanin, resigned from state service, renounced their Russian citizenship, and declared a policy of disobedience toward the government.

Although such cases remain rare, observing the steady rise of Russian Cossackdom under Putin, we should keep in mind that the history of the Cossacks is not just the history of faithful service to the throne, but also a history of massive anti-tsar uprisings.

5 The Shashka is a traditional Cossack and North Caucasian sabre, which is single-handed, guardless, and single-edged.