

# Repression Trap: The Mechanism of Escalating State Violence in Russia

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## *Executive Summary*

The arrest and jailing of prominent Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in January 2021 triggered a wave of demonstrations across Russia that were unprecedented in their geographic spread and scale. Though the underlying causes of frustration were much broader—encompassing poor socioeconomic conditions, the state of governance in Russia, and the regime’s clampdown on civil and political freedoms—Russian authorities’ violent response to the protests also fueled further discontent. By [some estimates](#), nearly 70 percent of all rallies since January were met with security forces’ interventions or excessive force.

Another prominent, if all-too-familiar feature of the Russian authorities’ response was foreign fearmongering. Russian president Vladimir Putin accused the United States of backing the opposition figure Alexey Navalny as cover for its efforts to “contain” Russia, and Putin’s spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, accused the U.S. Embassy in Moscow of encouraging the Russians to break the law. The specter of foreign meddling has long been a narrative tool of the Kremlin to explain away domestic dissent, but there are worrying signs that authorities at all levels have internalized this lie. A greater willingness to deploy force against demonstrators, combined with an expansion of the power and capabilities of Russia’s security forces, are symptoms of a self-perpetuating “repression trap,” whereby the expanded role of the security services amplifies the Kremlin’s external threat assessment and justifies its use of greater repression at home.

The interplay of foreign and domestic policy has profound implications for Russia’s relations with the West. The more confrontational Russia’s relations with the West become, the more political weight is given to Russia’s so-called “securocrats,” defined as government officials who share a dogmatic belief that Russia

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<sup>1</sup> All views expressed in this analysis are those of the author and do not represent an official position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

is under foreign attack.<sup>2</sup> The more emboldened they become, the greater the decisionmaking clout of the security services grows within the state apparatus, which only accentuates profound differences between Russia and the West over interests, values, and conceptions of global order.

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### *A Shift in Contentious Politics in Russia: From Economic to Political Protests*

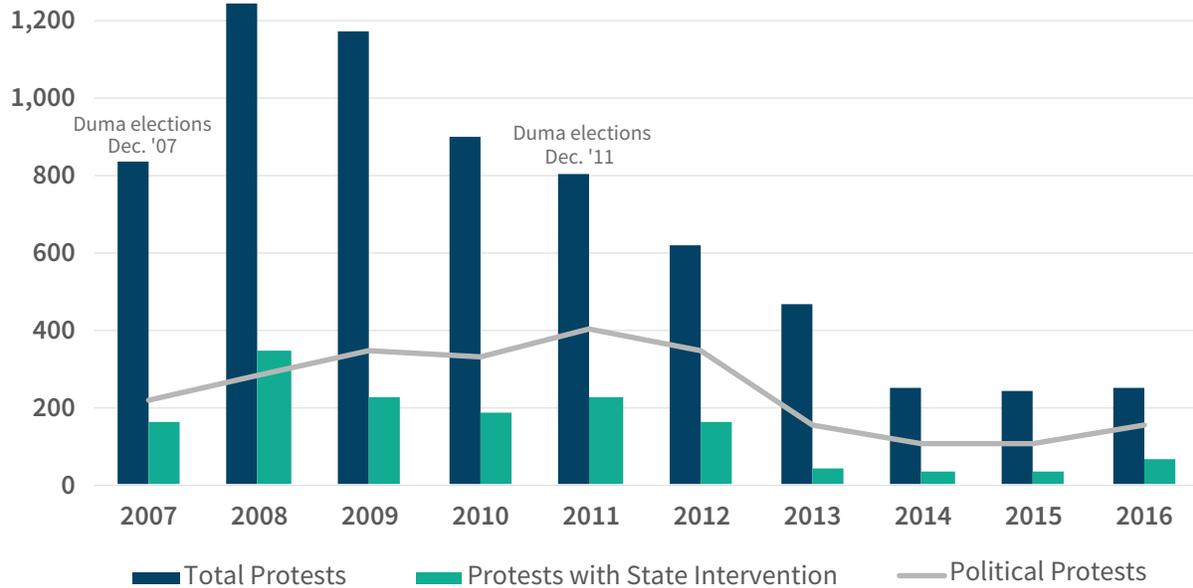
Protests in Russia have grown in frequency over the past decade and have gone through various stages. Following the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya Square demonstrations in opposition to Putin's return to the presidency, corruption became the dominant driver of protest. Even the massive 2018 pension reform protests were reframed as anti-corruption demonstrations by **their organizers**. In March 2017, the Navalny team released a documentary film detailing corruption by then prime minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev. The lack of the Kremlin's response to the revelations of embezzlement of public funds paved the way for country-wide protests organized by Navalny's organization. Yet, the focus on corruption was economic in nature. The object of protests wasn't Russian politics, per se, but rather the indignity of elite self-enrichment at a time of declining living standards. From 2012 to 2019, political rallies comprised only 25–30 percent of the total protests, increasing to nearly 40 percent during the periods surrounding Russia's presidential and parliamentary elections (see Figure 1). The majority were driven by economic concerns.

Beginning in 2019, protests became more overtly political in nature, although they continue to occur against the backdrop of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. The barring of independent and opposition candidates from running in Moscow city's Duma elections triggered a wave of demonstrations in the summer of 2019. A year later, a controversial national constitutional referendum that allowed Putin to "reset" his term limits provoked large-scale demonstrations across Russia in summer of 2020 (see Figure 2). Large-scale demonstrations once again broke out in January–March of 2021 in response to the arrest and imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

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<sup>2</sup> This belief prompts securocrats to view a range of political and social issues, including protests, through the lens of security. See Mark Galeotti, "The Law Enforcement Agencies: Russian Domestic Security and International Implications," The Marshall Center Security Insights, February 2020, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/law-enforcement-agencies-russian-domestic-security-and-international-implications-0#toc-the-marshall-center-security-insights>.

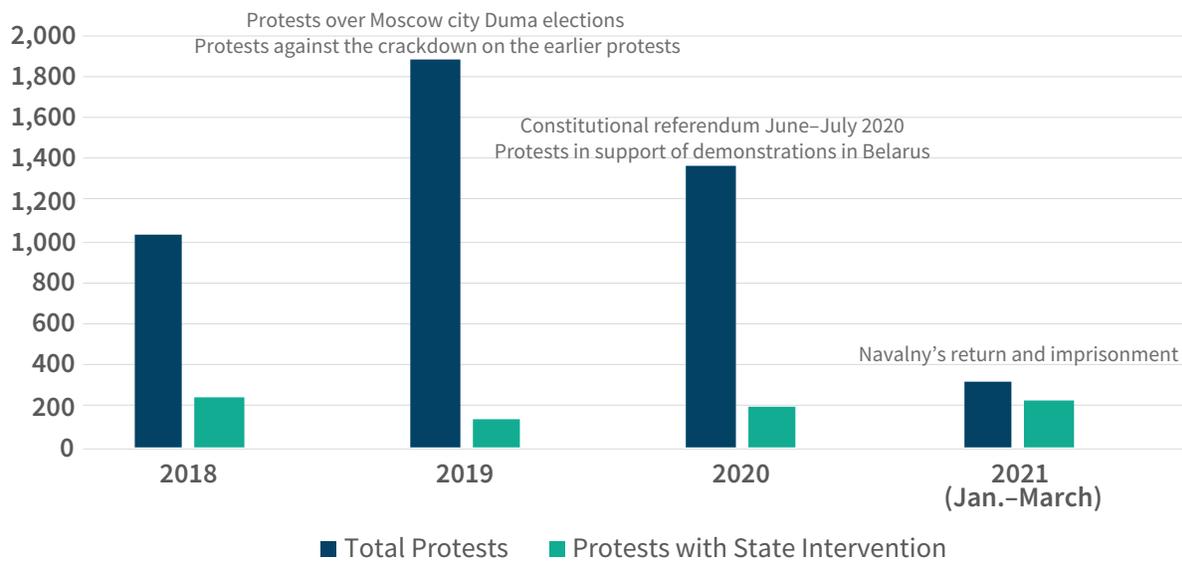
Figure 1: Protests in Russia (2007–2016)



Source: Data collected by the author as part of the broader project funded by the Office of Naval Research under the Minerva award N00014-15-1-2788.

Note: State intervention involves arrests, involvement of police in containing protests, application of force for dissolving protests, and other forms of protest disruption. Data on protests was collected from [namarsh.ru](http://namarsh.ru) (Protest News section). The [namarsh.ru](http://namarsh.ru) website systematically aggregates information about protests from its own network of regional representatives and from press and online reports. The [namarsh.ru](http://namarsh.ru) source has been utilized in other Russian protest datasets.

Figure 2: Protests in Russia (2018–2021)



Source: “The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project: Dashboard,” ACLED, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>.

As protests in Russia have become more politically focused in recent years, Russian authorities have relied on increasingly repressive tactics to quiet dissent. In 2014, the Kremlin pushed through the Russian parliament legislation institutionalizing administrative and criminal punishment for participation in unsanctioned rallies and tightened the rules for receiving permits for protests. In November 2019, a “sovereign internet” law went into effect requiring internet service providers to install surveillance equipment for tracking, filtering, and rerouting internet traffic. Russia’s “telecommunications watchdog,” Roskomnadzor, **has relied** on this equipment to extrajudicially block access to online content regarded as a threat. Internet surveillance tools have been used to identify and prosecute protest organizers in advance of demonstrations. Russian authorities have also **pressured social media companies** to remove online information about protests. Since the onset of the global pandemic, the regime has also selectively used Covid-19 restrictions as a proactive excuse to **deny permission** to protestors. In December 2020, President Putin signed a law imposing penalties on protests’ organizers accused of allowing children younger than 18 to take part in unsanctioned demonstrations. Jointly, these laws have laid the legal and informational groundwork for a more militarized response to demonstrations from Russia’s security organs.

Unsurprisingly, state interventions have become more violent. From 2007 to 2020, only about 20 percent of protests were met with intervention by police, suggesting that Russian authorities exercised at least a degree of restraint.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, 68 percent of demonstrations in January–March of 2021 were met with state interventions, some of which involved the use of excessive force by the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) Special Purpose Mobile Unit (OMON), riot police of the Ministry of Interior (MVD), and military police. During a month of rallies following Navalny’s return, police **detained** more than 11,000 people across 130 cities and launched 90 criminal investigations. In Moscow, the city authorities used facial recognition technologies installed for tracking people’s movement during the Covid-19 lockdowns to identify participants of unauthorized demonstrations. Multiple cases of torture, threats, and inhumane treatment were registered across Russia’s cities. One could argue that this intensification represents the Navalny-return effect.

Official rhetoric and state-controlled media in Russia have long sought to draw links between non-systemic political opposition in Russia and shadowy, foreign meddlers, and to present protests as unnatural and destabilizing events. This rhetoric has intensified in recent years. In a series of interviews in February 2021, President Putin himself employed the mantra of foreign meddling, which could also be interpreted as “mirroring” of growing Western complaints of Russian malign interference. While insisting that the West has always sought to foment discord in Russia, Putin **suggested** that pandemic-related restrictions and fatigue had made Russians more susceptible to foreign provocations, and more inclined to blame authorities for their hardships. Other public officials—such as the head of Russia’s Security Council **Nikolai Patrushev** and the head of Rosgvardiya, **Viktor Zolotov**—compared the Navalny protests to the “color revolutions” instigated from abroad.

It is easy to dismiss the Kremlin’s foreign fearmongering as unremarkable—a tried-and-true political tactic for tough economic times. But in light of other evolutions in Russian politics—an increase in political protests, the strengthening of security organs, and the systematic dismantling of Russia’s non-systemic opposition—the rhetoric of foreign interference begins to look more like a symptom than a tactic. In other words, political technocrats in the Kremlin have lost control of the narrative. Their rhetoric indicates a genuine rather than manufactured threat perception and a renewed focus on regime survival.

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3 The suppression of demonstrations was highest during the election periods. See, for example, Tomila Lankina and Katerina Tertychnaya, “Protest in Electoral Autocracies: A New Dataset, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2020): 20–36.

## *Preparing for a War on Two Fronts*

Russia's perceptions of external and internal security threats have always **been interconnected**. Moscow attributes the so-called color revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) to malign external forces and is anxious that similar revolutions could occur within Russia. As a result, opposition to regime change has become a central theme of Russian foreign policy and a major source of discord with the West. The overthrow of President Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2014 only reinforced this perception. The events of 2014 also **amplified** the Kremlin's concerns over the readiness of the Russian Ministry of Interior to effectively clamp down on "paid agents of the West." As a result, the Kremlin set about reforming Russia's security apparatus with the dual goal of better integrating the Ministry of Interior into national defense and of **creating a security institution separate** from the existing defense infrastructure designed to confront threats to the executive emanating from within Russia's own military and security agencies.

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Rosgvardiya, created in 2016, mostly composes of transfers from Interior Ministry forces. It is at once a law enforcement agency for protecting public order and a security force for the regime; an element of state defense that could be used jointly with the military in times of war, crisis, and peace; and an administrative arm to enforce court orders and assist in the transportation of detained citizens. In a **phased transition** that involved the integration of the MVD's Internal Troops (VV), OMON, Special Rapid Response Detachment (SOBR), other security units, and the elaboration of the troops' organizational and staff structure, Rosgvardiya quickly grew into a formidable organization.

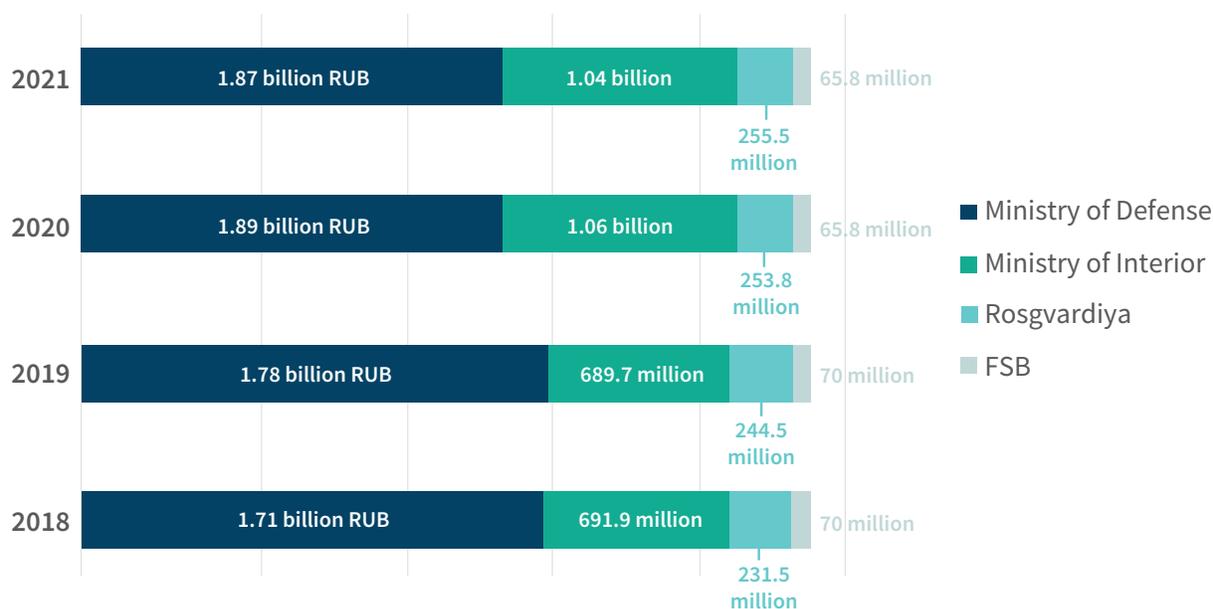
In addition to Rosgvardiya, the Federal Security Service (FSB), Presidential Security Service (SBP), Investigative Committee (SK), and Prosecutor General's Office have all grown in size and power in recent years. In 2020, **more than one-tenth** of declared government spending was allocated to internal security (see Figure 3), while the combined internal security and defense budget constituted **nearly 30 percent** of Russia's national budget. In the 2020 federal budget, Ministry of Defense expenditures were the highest among all security agencies at 1.89 trillion rubles (\$28.2 billion). Notably, the budget of the Ministry of Interior was increased to 1.06 trillion rubles (\$15.8 billion), reaching the level of federal assignments comparable to that before the MVD's 2016 reorganization, suggesting that the state chooses to invest lavishly in domestic security institutions—including the police. Rosgvardiya's budget has also grown incrementally since its creation in 2016, reaching 254.8 billion rubles (\$3.8 billion) in 2020. Experts **assess** that the number of Russian security forces personnel has grown by 10 percent since 2014, with the combined MVD and Rosgvardiya's personnel exceeding the active-duty defense cadres.<sup>4</sup> Both the MVD and

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<sup>4</sup> The assessments of the security services' personnel vary. According to the Russian experts, in 2018, the Ministry of Defense had about 800,000 active-duty troops, MVD had just under 700,000 people, and Rosgvardiya had around 340,000. See Sofiya Savina, "Triumf Boli: Ussledivanie o Tom, Skol'ko v Rossii Silovikov i Mnogo li Oni Poluchayut," Proekt, <https://www.proekt.media/research/zarplata-siloviki/>.

Rosgvardiya have launched recruitment drives in the wake of January 2021 demonstrations and their human resources are expected to rise.

Figure 3: Annual Federal Assignations to Russia’s Security Agencies



Source: Federal Law No. 362-FZ, “On Federal Budget for 2018 and Planned Budget for 2019 and 2020”, adopted on May 12, 2017, [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_284360/#dst0](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_284360/#dst0); Federal Law No. 459-FZ, “On Federal Budget for 2019 and Planned Budget for 2020 and 2021,” adopted on November 29, 2018, [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_312362/#dst0](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_312362/#dst0).

Note: The real budget figures may differ as some of the defense/security expenditures are classified. Furthermore, the approved budgets do not take into consideration the rate of inflation. Even as the budget grows, the purchasing capacity does not increase uniformly with it.

Rosgvardiya has a different mandate from other security institutions in Russia, but because it draws its forces from other branches, it is culturally part of an integrated security and military architecture that plans and trains for a full spectrum of operations ranging from law and order and counterterrorism to protection of critical infrastructure and territorial and border defense. For instance, Rosgvardiya has developed a series of patrol armored vehicles based on various KAMAZ models designed for military applications, and has procured mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles that it outfitted with different gun turrets.<sup>5</sup> The upgrade was designated for the Russian Border Guards, but it has been used by the Internal Troops, Federal Prison Service, and troops of the Ministry of Emergency Situations. The **modernized versions** of Rosgvardiya’s pistols, assault rifles, **combat reconnaissance vehicles, communications, and other systems**, combined with the expeditionary, cyber, and electronic warfare **capabilities and training** of its troops, have transformed the Rosgvardiya into a more “muscular” force that is **interoperable** with the Russian Ministry of Defense (units of the two agencies have held joint wargaming exercises and performed side-by-side in expeditionary operations abroad). Since 2018, for example, OMON has had police vans equipped with lasers with blinding capabilities and acoustic blasters. While the **vehicles** have been procured for counterterrorism operations, they can potentially be deployed for riot control. Some

5 Rosgvardiya also uses Ural-VV 6x6 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles since 2018. See, for example, “Patrul A,” Army Guide, <http://www.army-guide.com/eng/product5274.html>.

of the Rosgvardiya's reconnaissance equipment—reconnaissance UAVs—have been deployed in enforcing Covid-19 quarantine regime in Moscow and surrounding regions. The OMON and special operation units of Rosgvardiya are better paid, equipped, and trained than the operational regiments created within police units in larger Russian cities to assist in maintaining public order, or the regular polices forces of the MVD specializing in criminal investigation, traffic duties, and other public order and safety tasks.

Research in policing has shown that increased militarization of law enforcement agencies through the transfer of military-grade firearms and equipment and intelligence agency-style information gathering aimed at political activists lead to an increase in [violent behavior](#) in officers. In Russia, the militarization-violence nexus has been strengthened by the guarantees of anonymity granted to security personnel by law and the indoctrination of Rosgvardiya cadets to regard protesters as state enemies sponsored from abroad.<sup>6</sup> This vestige of Soviet-style ideological propaganda was made official by a presidential directive of September 2020, which mandates "[military-political work](#)" in the Rosgvardiya's ranks.

Also contributing to heightened repression in Russia is the patronal nature of Russian politics, whereby the personal relationships of decisionmakers to the Russian president grant informal power and protection and help sustain a system of individualized punishment and reward. Within this system, Vladimir Putin plays a balancing role, overseeing a security architecture with multiple overlapping agencies involved in perpetual competition. According to Russian sources, Viktor Zolotov, Rosgvardiya's chief, and Alexander Bortnikov, the director of FSB, have been personal enemies since the 2000s, when Zolotov sought to block Bortnikov's promotion to the top security position in the Kremlin. FSB, in turn, [played a role](#) in Zolotov's demotion from the president's personal guard position to a post in MVD in 2012. In 2018, FSB launched an investigation into Rosgvardiya's contract with a Crimea-based meat-processing plant, "Friendship of People" (*Druzhba Narodov*), that held a monopoly on the supply of produce to the Rosgvardiya. The retail prices for foods sold by the plant were several times higher than market prices. The results of this investigation might have been leaked to the Navalny team, which published an investigative report on corruption in Rosgvardiya. Zolotov, in turn, took to social media, threatening Navalny and challenging him to a duel, an event that brought the Kremlin's archnemesis into the limelight of public attention, much to the consternation of Putin, who typically avoids saying Navalny's name. Not only has Zolotov developed a personal vendetta against Navalny and, by association, against all those who have come out to demonstrate in his support, but Rosgvardiya's clampdown on the "foreign-inspired" demonstrations have also been used to underscore Zolotov's personal loyalty to the president. OMON's visceral attacks against protesters, therefore, should be viewed in part as behind-the-scenes tussles between Rosgvardiya and the FSB that reinforced Navalny's failed poisoning operation and the services' inability to prevent public unrest.

By expanding the aperture of the old and new security agencies, the Russian government has given more power to those who prioritize security—including personal security—over legality, who argue for more repressive policies emboldened by a legal environment conducive to the use of force, and who view popular uprisings as a dangerous and malign export from the West rather than a product of domestic grievances over political and economic conditions in the country.<sup>7</sup>

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6 In December 2020, the Russian president signed a law banning the publication or dissemination of any personal information of the personnel of MVD, Rosgvardiya, and other security agencies. In March 2021, Putin promised further protections to the security personnel and their family members, including from any threats in social media. Belarus experiences, where hackers leaked names and personal details of more than 1,000 police officers who took part in the violent crackdown against anti-government demonstrators, have shaped Russia's new legislation.

7 They include well-known frontline figures such as Sergei Naryshkin and Alexander Bastrykin, but also more bureaucratic figures such as Nikolai Patrushev and Vyacheslav Volodin.

## *Policy Implications and Conclusions*

Russia's response to the January–March 2021 protests demonstrates an evolution of the Kremlin's analysis regarding security threats to the regime and presages its future responses. The Russian regime has developed a sophisticated repressive machine that can effectively quell public dissent and will be relied upon to protect the regime through its eventual political transition in 2024 and beyond. This includes a diverse toolkit of legal pressure on critical media, harassment of independent civil society groups, and enhanced capacity to conduct precision censorship of the internet.

Thankfully, authorities have avoided relying on lethal force. But the risks of future state repression are high as Russia's various security organs, including Rosgvardiya, become more militarized, and as separate security agencies compete to outdo each other and demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin, as they increasingly conflate external and internal threats to its security and regime survival.

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The West should continue to closely observe Rosgvardiya's actions and the implementation of current and future legal authorities granted to this organization to better understand the Kremlin's own perceptions and the evolution of its military-security thinking. The Rosgvardiya's armament, equipment, and training; the types of talent and expertise it recruits; and the expanded scope of its operations suggest that the Kremlin has settled on the militarized internal security organization as a key pillar of regime security. Russia's internal security forces are likely to grow in response to increased domestic protests, elevating the risks of repression against internal dissent. Intensified domestic political turbulence will only amplify the mistrust in Moscow's relations with Washington and will challenge the international stability and predictability that U.S. policymakers actively seek. ■

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