

Can the Kremlin Control the Cossacks?

Per Enerud

The Cossack movement, almost entirely exterminated at the dawn of the godless Bolshevik reign, buried without honours, apparently forgotten, has, to the great surprise of the enlightened liberalism, not only managed to grow new shoots, but also to resurge and transform.

Sergey Kalekov, deputy head of the SPAS Cossack Community, 27 February 2013

In early March 2013, a detachment of Russian Cossacks appeared in the autonomic region of Gagauzia in Moldova. Their self-proclaimed task is to “preserve the Gagauz Motherland” – supposedly against the Moldovan government in Chisinau.

Only six months earlier, the Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a strategy for the Development of the Cossack Movement until 2020. Thus, Russia reinstates the Cossacks in state service, to fulfil official duties for the state – a position lost after the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks disbanded all Cossack units and initiated a policy of *razkazachivanie* – “de-Cossackisation” – to exterminate the Cossacks. Now, Kremlin seems to attempt to employ the Cossacks as a political instrument, both in Russia, and as in the example above, abroad.

At first glance – the Cossack Movement is everything a Russian government can wish for: they are highly patriotic, loyal and keen to serve. But the Cossack Movement is strongly rooted in a romanticised view of a glorious past and might not entirely harmonise with the Putin administration’s view of a modern Russia; and their outspoken views on religious and ethnic issues can create tension in sensitive regions. And, while the state expresses a wish to include the Cossacks in the state service, the Cossacks

may not be satisfied with the limited tasks the government is prepared to offer them.

The Cossack Movement is a complicated alloy of a historical re-enactment society, a militia, an ethnos and a volunteer group. In Russia, the Cossacks are referred to as an “ethno-social group”. In Imperial Russia they had a status as an “estate”. It is a matter of dispute if you need to be born into the Movement or if you can join it of your own volition. The Cossack Movement has strong elements of nostalgia, donning pre-revolutionary Cossack uniforms, weapons and so forth.

The movement’s function as a militia should not be underestimated – they claim loyalty to a “pure” patriotism, based on loyalty to the head of state and the Church, rather than to laws, state regulations and modern society. As the quotation at the start of this briefing suggests, the Cossack Movement expresses an alienation from *both* the Soviet heritage and liberal society.

During the Soviet era, the Cossacks were in essence exterminated through the Civil War, the purges and collectivisation. The Cossack units were disbanded and the Cossack identity was reduced to folklore or circus performances, dance acts or romantic elements in historical fiction. The post-Soviet period saw a rapid development of various Cossack groups, toting pre-revolutionary uniform and insignia and expressing a will to return to a traditional lifestyle, based on small-scale farming.

One of the problems with the Cossack Movement is that it is notoriously idiosyncratic. The very idea of being a Cossack is NOT being subject to any authority. The Cossacks emerged in the 15th century as serfs fled their patrons and settled far away from their former masters. The Cossack Movement saved elements of old Slavonic

democratic traditions, in opposition to authoritarian principles in Central Russia. If the mainstream Russian identity has its roots in a strictly hierarchical structure, the Cossack identity offers its members a role as active agents as individuals.

The modern Cossack Movement fits very well into a current Russian national idea, being based on religion, respect for the tsar and a Russian national myth. The movement is very strong in certain areas of Russia, e.g. Rostov-on-Don – the largest city in southern Russia. It can also be noted that the Cossack Movement has a strong presence in the North Caucasus, where it often evinces strong anti-Muslim sentiment.

The state has already, in concert with the various Cossack units, established a standardised system for uniforms and insignia, and also defined an option to employ Cossack units for certain services – assisting the border police for patrol service, emergency situations etc. The current strategy aims to fine-tune the tasks of the Cossack Movement within the state context. Two of the priorities are to create conditions to attract members of the Cossack Movement to serve in the Armed Forces and in other branches of the Russian government, and to utilise the Cossack Movement's international cooperation with similar groups in the Commonwealth of Independent States countries and the "far abroad", i.e. Europe, Canada and the US. The strategy also envisions a role for the movement role in boosting patriotism among young people.

The strategy clearly foresees a role for the Cossack Movement in a wider national security context, but stops short of establishing Cossack units in the Armed Forces. Individual Cossacks should be encouraged to serve, but the Cossack organisations should only be viewed as *utility forces*, providing support to the regular Armed Forces.

It seems that the Russian authorities view the Cossack Movement first and foremost as a potential resource for recruiting contract soldiers. The movement can create a social context where soldiering is attractive and even prestigious.

It is, however, hard to see how the Cossack Movement can help to boost patriotic zeal among young people in today's Russia. The movement is very visible and vocal; it has, possibly, certain romantic qualities. It is likely that the Cossack Movement might "save the saved" for the Armed Forces, but for the bulk of the young men of Russia their ethos is irrelevant and possibly even alien. It is also a movement that represents a conservative, patriarchal lifestyle. There are not very many active roles for women in the Cossack culture. This alienates the movement from urban, modern circles of young Russians.

The idea of exploiting the Cossacks' international network is interesting from many perspectives. There are strong Cossack movements in other countries, notably in Ukraine, the South Caucasus and Moldova. In the Moldovan case, the Cossack Movement of the rebel region of Transnistria supports the region's secession from the Republic of Moldova and can be viewed as an instrument for Moscow to increase its influence. In Ukraine, some Cossack groups are strongly anti-Russian, while others are affiliated with Moscow.

Russia is engaging in a daring project in trying to co-opt the movement. Cossacks will hardly follow instructions from Moscow blindly, and the Russian Cossack Movement is certainly not a very homogeneous organisation. It is also an issue to what degree the Cossacks will be loyal to policies they deem contradictory to their ethos. Clashes between Cossacks and ethnic minorities are not rare, and the Cossacks have repeatedly demanded the right to bear firearms. An article in the *New York Times* of 17 March 2013 describes how local authorities are employing Cossacks to perform police duties, while they are not restricted by laws. "A complaint cannot be made against a Cossack, and a Cossack cannot be fired", a police officer is quoted as saying. Russia might face problems establishing a legal status for Cossacks, as the Cossacks tend to view themselves as being above the law.

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