

Ukraine's New Force Seeks to Harness 'Maidan' Spirit

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A Ukrainian soldier manning an armored personnel carrier on the Russian border in east Ukraine on Wednesday.

NOVI PETRIVTSI, Ukraine — The scores of recruits who turned out this week at an assault course training base an hour's drive from Kiev were a motley crew ranging from older veterans with security backgrounds to young people fresh from college with no combat skills at all.

Amid simulated artillery blasts and the stutter of machine-gun fire, men in jeans and sweaters, others in combat fatigues, dive to the ground, leap to their feet, sprint and crouch in firing positions.

Welcome to the first days of training for Ukraine's National Guard, a paramilitary force in the making aimed at cleaning up the image of the country's discredited security forces and beefing up defenses against a Russian military threat.

"I am training as a machine-gunner," said 25-year-old Mikhail Nazar, who has left his

three-year-old daughter with his ex-wife in the west of the country and was kitted out in hard hat and plain brown military tunic.

"I have never had training before, but I fired twice today."

Looking at the hasty preparations underway at the Novi Petrivtsi base — one recruit said proudly that six months' assault training was being packed into just a few weeks — it is fair to assume this force might not be a match for the Russian army, come the day.

In Kiev on Wednesday, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council opened a session devoted to threats to national security following Russia's moves to take control of the Crimean peninsula. A statement on the website of the Council, a body made up of senior military and security officials, said the meeting was devoted to "the state of Ukraine's national security and measures to neutralize foreign and domestic political threats."

The new National Guard will number about 33,000 when it is at full strength and will build on existing Interior Ministry troops whose reputation was tarnished in the country's bloody revolt.

More than 100 people were killed on the streets of the capital, many by police snipers, before the flight of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and his close allies on Feb. 21, after which Russian forces seized control of Ukraine's Crimea.

The Berkut riot police are the bogeymen of Ukraine's bloody revolt and have been disbanded. But Interior Ministry forces were also seen to have been complicit in the violence and have been tarred with the same brush in public opinion.

Local police in many areas are also demoralized because they have been identified with the bribe-taking and shiftlessness of the fugitive Yanukovich's regime.

The new National Guard, which will include the core of existing Interior Ministry troops, will assume responsibility for maintaining public order and guarding strategic facilities such as nuclear power stations.

In the event of a Russian incursion across the border — Kiev says there are 60,000 Russian servicemen stationed in a curve running down Ukraine's eastern and southern borders to Crimea — it would be down not to the National Guard but to Ukraine's 180,000-strong armed forces to repel an attack.

But the formation of the National Guard has a significance beyond its paramilitary function.

Security chiefs are trying to harness the fighting spirit of the Maidan, the name for both Kiev's Independence Square and the anti-Yanukovich revolt, and are actively drumming up recruits among those who braved police bullets.

In a population deeply cynical of politicians, Ukraine's leaders hope the association with the Maidan will also confer respectability on the new force.

At the entrance to the windswept training range near the village of Novi Petrivtsi a board shows a recruit repeating the oath to protect Ukraine's "territorial integrity."

The acreage beyond is dotted with full-size mock-ups of a plane, a helicopter and other facilities in which recruits practice assault tactics, freeing hostages and the like.

Many of those who turned out to duck, dive and crawl on the sodden ground of the range this week amid the deafening sounds of battle earned their spurs on the Maidan.

They included several "sotniks," commanders of urban battalions that entered into Maidan mythology with the three-month defense of Independence Square from government forces.

One such was Zhan — "simply Zhan," he said when asked for his surname — a 43-year-old former bodyguard who wore a pistol on his thigh and goggles perched on his forehead that gave him the look of a pioneering aviator.

"We will do all we can to protect Ukraine," he said.

But is the force a match for the Russians?

"The important thing is not quantity but quality. The main thing is fighting spirit. The main thing is patriotism. We respect our country. We have bigger hearts."

Andrei Parubiy, a ramrod-straight figure who led Maidan self-defense forces and became Ukraine's effective head of security as secretary of the National Defense and Security Council, said: "We are trying, as quickly as possible, to upgrade our armed forces so that we can work effectively."

Experts see a logic to the Guard's creation, given the extent to which many in the security forces were identified with Yanukovich's crackdown and even with pro-Russia interests.

"It is a way of bringing loyal forces into the institutions that exist today. It also brings in new ideas. This is an opportunity," said James Greene, a senior fellow for the London-based Institute for Statecraft.

Greene cautioned that it had to be part of an integrated structure coordinated with the army and should not revert to being an independent internal force. "It looks like a parallel force operating under a different direction not necessarily coordinated with the army," he said.

"You have to make sure that it does not become politicized, that you are not putting new wine into old wine-skins," he said.

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