



RUSSIAN IMPERIAL MOVEMENT EVOLUTION, IDEOLOGY, GOALS & ACTIVITIES

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The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is an Aryan far-right white supremacist organization. It was established by Stanislav Vorobyev in Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 2002. RIM promotes Russian ethno-nationalism, calls for the restoration of the tsarist regime in Russia, and seeks to inflame the extremism of Aryan supremacism in the West. It maintains links with neo-Nazi groups and white Aryans in Europe and the United States.

BACKGROUND

Deeply ingrained in ultranationalism, RIM is markedly notorious for its anti-Semitic stances, minorities, and immigrants. Since inception, it has provided military training to the RIM member Russian citizens and members of like-minded organizations from other countries; the training exercises have been taking place at its facilities in Saint Petersburg. The RIM members of the military wing, known as the Imperial Legion, fought alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, and participated in military conflicts in Syria and Libya.

In the infancy years, RIM did not receive much attention from the international community; the RIM operations back then focused on the Russian domestic politics. It only rose to the international arena in 2014, when it began to support, develop, and train the separatists in Ukraine to fight the Ukrainian government forces, and made its armed wing Imperial Legion available in the service of Russian fighters. Later, it attracted more attention in 2015, when it began to drum up for its leadership activity by influencing other Aryan groups in Europe and America.

In April of 2020, the US State Department included RIM among the global terrorist organizations; this step was the first designation of a far-right group as a terrorist entity. This shows the growing concern about violence from such groups in the West.

This designation is likely to impede the RIM activity in establishing relations with far-right groups in the US and Europe and play down its efforts to persuade foreign extremists to travel to Russia for combat training, and to engage in other activities.

IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

RIM describes itself as a Russian Orthodox monarchical movement, and its ideology is based on an extremist Aryan racist, white supremacist anti-Semitic, pro-Russian ultranationalist movement. It espouses anti-gay, bisexual, and transgender slogans.

RIM also glorifies the institutions of the monarchy and the Russian Orthodox Church, and considers that the monarchy has all political power, and the Church has spiritual power.

RIM opposes the current regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin, calls for the revival of the great Russian Empire that existed before 1917, and calls for the Russian state to occupy all the territories inhabited by the Russian race. To this end, RIM sent its armed groups to join pro-Russian separatists in fighting across eastern Ukraine.

RIM OPERATIONS

Between 2014 and 2016, RIM expanded its influence across Ukraine, and instrumentalized its resources to support the Russian side in the conflict. 2014 was the turning point for RIM since the outbreak of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, between government forces and pro-Russian separatists. These developments destabilized the relations between the groups on the far-right of Russia and prompted the imperialist movement to switch its attention beyond the Russian domestic politics. The RIM leader, Vorobyev, stated that the greatest threat to the Russian nation is the stability of the regimes seen hostile to RIM in all the territories inhabited by the Russian race.

While interfering in Ukraine, RIM seized the opportunity to destabilize the Kiev government and further its goal of protecting ethnic Russians. After Russia annexed Crimea in February of 2014, the RIM leader traveled with three other members to Crimea on a plane carrying members of the Russian army and trained the members there.

RIM joined a nationalist bloc of far-right Russian political parties, including the ultranationalist Rodina Party, and held a large demonstration in Moscow, supporting Russians residing in Ukraine. Developments in early 2014 breathed new life into the RIM Moscow branch, which had previously had no visible impact.

COMBAT TRAINING

It was reported that RIM began fighting alongside the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and had sent at least 300 fighters to fight there. Some subject-matter experts spelled out that Russian intelligence was aware of the RIM activities but allowed it to operate to achieve short-term benefits.

A report issued by the Soufan Center concluded that the RIM military wing, the Imperial Legion, sent its fighters to other conflict areas, including Syria, Libya, and the Central African Republic.

With the RIM activity snowballing into the immediate vicinity, white supremacist fanatics had their own theater to learn to fight in Ukraine, and to receive training. Recent information indicates that about 17,000 foreigners from more than 50 countries, including the US, went to fight in Ukraine. RIM had a decisive effect on supporting the pro-secessionist side; over the years, it successfully convinced white supremacist Aryan foreigners from different countries to visit their camps in Saint Petersburg for combat training. The RIM capabilities and intent to carry out terrorist activities made it a very real threat.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In April 2012, RIM participated in the creation of a party called the NATIONALISTS PARTY linked to the All-Russian Ethnic Political Association (REPA), which is a rival to the Russian Platform. This party chose the Russian imperial flag as its symbol. In contrast to the new force, the NATIONALIST PARTY was seen as a big house for appealing to the ideologies of the organizations that make up REPA, including neo-Nazis, moderate nationalists, the RIM audience of monarchists and orthodox nationalists. When it first attempted to influence local electoral politics in 2012, RIM joined the Russian far-right nationalist organizations, after Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian President, licensed the registration of new political parties. RIM and many member organizations under the Russian program immediately established the New Force, a bloc of far-right nationalist movements headed by the Rodina Party. Although the Party's manifesto proclaims respect for equality, liberal and democratic values, at the same time it proposes extremist supremacist arrangements, such as restricting immigration to people of Russian descent only and detaining illegal immigrants in camps before deportation. Unlike the neo-Nazis, the Party attempted to win the approval and support of the moderate nationalists.

EXTERNAL EXPANSION

RIM sought to be at the forefront of movements that in white supremacy in the years following its activities in Ukraine; however, with the Russian government intensifying pressure on far-right nationalist organizations between 2014 and 2015, some movements began to seek safe refuge abroad, while only a few have escaped, particularly those linked to the far-right Rodina party. In an initiative known as the Last Crusade, RIM expanded its communications with white supremacist groups in the US and Europe. For instance, In March 2015, RIM participated in the Russian International Forum of Conservatives, an Aryan racist conference on white supremacy, held in Saint Petersburg, and organized by the far-right Russian political party Rodina. Among the attendance were well-known leaders in the US, such as Jared Taylor, and European far-right organizations, including Golden Dawn (Greece), the National Democratic Party (Germany), and Forza Nuova (Italy). In September 2015, the RIM leader traveled to Sweden to meet with the Northern Resistance Movement (NRM), a neo-Nazi group active in all Scandinavian countries.

RIM TRAJECTORY

- From June 2014 to January 2016: RIM trained and developed foreign fighters for war in eastern Ukraine, where members of the group's Imperial Legion fought alongside pro-Russian separatists.
- November 2016: Viktor Milen, a member of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) who was trained by RIM in the Partizan paramilitary course in August 2016, bombed a bookstore in Gothenburg, Sweden. The attack was cited by the US State Department as an additional reason for blacklisting RIM as a terrorist group.
- January 5, 2017: Viktor Milen attacked a refugee shelter in Gothenburg, Sweden.
- January 25, 2017: Viktor Milen and Anton Thulin, both of whom had military training by RIM, attempted to bomb a general camp for asylum seekers in Gothenburg, Sweden.
- April 2019: Researchers confirmed the presence of RIM fighters in Syria since April 2019. Although the exact dates are not known, RIM announces that the goal of its campaign and presence in Syria is to protect Christians in the country.
- January 2020: RIM claimed responsibility for the killing of two of its soldiers participating in the war in Libya. Analysts believe that the Imperial Legion soldiers are fighting alongside the Russian-backed Libyan National Army.

RUSSIAN OVERLOOK

Analysts observe that the RIM activities enhance Moscow's goals in two key areas: supporting Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine and seeking to fuel white supremacist extremism in Europe and the US. The latter undoubtedly undermines Western liberal democracy, which is a key goal of the Kremlin.

Russia has supported many far-right groups in Europe, including the ultranationalists in Slovakia, Hungary, Montenegro, and Bosnia. This is an indirect policy of the Kremlin's strategy to sow discord and instability in Europe. RIM also helped support neo-Nazi organizations in Scandinavia that go in perfect harmony with the general trend and foreign policy of the Russian government to stoke internal divisions along ethnic lines and sow chaos in Western democracies.

The Kremlin has shown RIM much leniency, especially since the RIM activities are consistent with Russia's interests at home and abroad. However, we have no physical evidence that the Kremlin officially supports RIM. Michael Carpenter, former official at US Defense Department, described Moscow's relationship with RIM as hostile coexistence.

Although RIM had opposed the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin before the war in Ukraine, which led to the intelligence services raiding their centers in the country. Such raids disappeared when RIM increased its activities abroad, especially when it directed its attention to Ukraine and other countries of interest to Russia. When the rudder was switched, some members of the Imperial Legion stated that Moscow, despite not directly supporting RIM, does not restrict or prevent its activities.

Russia has classified RIM as an extremist group, and the Russian Ministry of Justice has classified its website and many associated publications as extremist material since 2012. Moreover, Moscow later protested to the US State Department when it added RIM to the list of global terrorist movements, and the Russian Prosecutor General's Office insisted that the RIM activities are limited to Russian Orthodox religious holidays.

RIM sought to take advantage of its previous reputation for recruitment, although social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram had their pages closed after the US designated it a terrorist group. Although Russia's monitoring and censorship agency has blocked the RIM official website, the RIM accounts are still active on the VKONTAKTE and Telegram platforms.

In 2017, the Imperial Russian Movement appeared at a trial in Sweden of three men accused of planning bomb attacks targeting asylum seekers. Two of the accused men

traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, for eleven days of military training at a camp run by RIM, prosecutors spelled out.

Recognizing the threat imposed by the Aryan movements is an unprecedented political step in US efforts to combat the violent supremacy of whites across borders. Now that RIM is blacklisted, US law enforcement, intelligence, and financial agencies can rely on a wide range of legal measures to combat the threat from such groups, including monitoring interpersonal communications. The recent designation enables law enforcement agencies to share intelligence with US allies abroad, thus facilitating the task of the war on international terrorism.

Given the said information, it is reported that national security officials were looking for a neo-Nazi-style group that the US government could designate as a foreign terrorist organization. Fears have been mounting for years about the existence of a transnational Aryan supremacy movement, or an alternative far-right movement, as evidenced by a live broadcast on Facebook of an Australian man who opened fire in 2019 at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and killed 51 civilian worshippers.

Fighting domestic terrorism, including violent white ultranationalist activism, became a priority for the FBI. Of good note, federal and local authorities have made a wave of arrests in recent months, targeting members of two neo-Nazi groups called the ATOMWAFFEN Division and The Base. The FBI is still looking for any connection of the RIM leader to the Russian government's security or official intelligence services.

Twenty years ago, the US underestimated the increased threat of religious terrorism, and successive US governments saw warning signs piling up in the 1990s about the threat from Al-Qaeda. That is why governments are now rushing to confront the Aryan groups before their situation gets worse, whether they are local or multinational.