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New Warnings of a Return to Brezhnev Era

By The Moscow Times

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Russia's security and law enforcement agencies have a case of summer fever. On Thursday, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a law that expands the powers of the Federal Security Service. The main provision allows the FSB to issue warnings to people whose actions "create the conditions for a crime." The bill allows for 15-day sentences or fines of 500 rubles to 1,000 rubles ($16.50 to $33) for people who "obstruct the work" of an FSB agent.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Now, the government's other security and law enforcement agencies are saying, "You gave the FSB more powers, what about us?"

For example, Vyacheslav Davydov, director of the Moscow department of the Federal Drug Control Service, wants to require nightclubs to close down after midnight. He thinks that this will help his agency battle drug use.

The traffic police are also joining the bandwagon. After the law regulating the minimum

blood-alcohol level among drivers was annulled, police have become even more active arresting drivers on drunk-driving charges. Considering that the alcohol testers the police carry give positive results even if the only thing a driver had consumed was a bottle of kvas, it is easy to imagine what a boon this has been for the traffic police in terms of collecting bribes.

State Duma deputies are not missing this opportunity either. They have proposed a bill to allow the government to seize a person's apartment if he is behind in payments for communal services by more than six months.

By all indications, this burst of activity is driven by two factors. First, Medvedev's much-acclaimed initiative to limit the number of administrative barriers for businessmen — above all, lowering the number of inspections that regulatory agencies are allowed to conduct on businesses — has made a notable dent in many bureaucrats' side business. Although they have made up for some of the losses by simply demanding a higher sum for each inspection, the bureaucrats are constantly looking for new ways to supplement their meager salaries.

The second factor is more complex. In answer to allegations that siloviki organizations are chronically negligent and ineffective, they are claiming that they need more powers to help them do their jobs properly.

During the oil-boom years, Russians signed off on an unofficial "social contract" with the government: in exchange for a higher standard of living, Russians were willing to tolerate the government gaining more control and limiting their civil rights. But now, the latest increase in government interference in people's lives is occurring at a time when the incomes of Russians have dropped sharply. Russians are far less tolerant now of the government chipping away their rights, and their growing discontent could easily spill into the streets.

Afraid of an increase in protests, the government, instead of relaxing its control over the people, is doing the opposite. The new FSB law is a vivid example. It is clear that one of the main motives in pushing for the power to give "warnings" to people who are "about to commit a crime" was to intimidate leaders of protest movements and convince them that it would be in their best interest to confine their complaints to the kitchen. The FSB law is just one more example of how little the country has progressed from the Brezhnev years.

This comment appeared as an editorial in Vedomosti. Richard Lourie will return to this spot in September.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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