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Putin Calls for Fewer Jury Trials

By Nabi Abdullaev

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Monday called for further restrictions on the use of jury trials in Russia, saying that only federal courts should consider them.

"I believe it is possible to consider giving an opportunity for a jury trial to every citizen who may face the death penalty, but the trial should be held on the level of a federal district," Putin said at the State Council meeting Monday.

The meeting, chaired by President Dmitry Medvedev, also discussed ethnic tensions that rocked several Russian cities earlier this month. While technically still on the books in Russia, the country's top courts and Medvedev have backed a moratorium on executions.

"Jury trials are not effective," Putin said, adding that in certain regions juries base their decisions on ethnic or clannish motives rather than the gravity of the crime.

The prime minister did not name the regions, but he appeared to be referring to the Northern Caucasus republics, where juries often acquit suspects, mainly in terrorism cases, who

complain of being tortured for confessions by local law enforcers.

Putin unexpectedly moved on to the jury trial issue after lamenting over a native of the Northern Caucasus who killed an ethnic-Russian football fan in a street brawl in Moscow in early December. The killing sparked nationalist riots in Moscow and other Russian cities.

Putin said Monday that Aslan Cherkesov, the suspected killer, had been sentenced in the past on drug-related charges and last year for assault and battery and that it was unclear why he was not in jail.

When Cherkesov's arrest was sanctioned in court Dec. 8, prosecutors mentioned only his previous theft convictions, which could not have been considered by juries.

Putin's latest proposal extends the Kremlin's policy of reducing the number of jury trials in Russia.

In December 2008, the State Duma voted to ban jury trials in terrorism, espionage, armed mutiny, mass disorders and sabotage cases. This fall, several members of the Putin-led United Russia party submitted a bill to the Duma that would ban juries from hearing extremism cases.

Last year, Medvedev called for further reductions to possible jury trials, primarily in offenses committed by criminal groups.

The initiatives have outraged civil activists, who argue that courts are increasingly dependent upon the will of the authorities, with professional judges routinely supporting prosecutors. Jury trials, they say, remain the only recourse for a fair hearing in court.

According to Supreme Court statistics, the acquittal rate in 791,802 cases considered by Russian courts in the first nine months of 2010 was 0.7 percent. Juries considered only 465 cases during the period, finding 847 defendants guilty and 169 people — or about 16 percent of defendants — not guilty.

In the past few years there were several jury acquittals that were highly embarrassing for the authorities. Last month, a jury cleared a group of former Yevroset managers accused of abducting a fellow employee. The case was widely seen as a retaliation by corrupt law enforcers against ex-CEO and owner, Yevgeny Chichvarkin, who is fighting related extradition charges in London.

Also earlier this year, a jury cleared for the second time retired intelligence colonel Vladimir Kvachkov and two other men accused of attempting in 2005 to assassinate Anatoly Chubais, then-head of the state power monopoly.

Kvachkov was re-arrested last week on charges of organizing an armed rebellion against the state.

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