

New State Body Stirs Crackdown Fears

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Stirring new fears of an election season crackdown on the political opposition, the Kremlin announced Friday that President Dmitry Medvedev has created an intergovernmental commission tasked with "coordinating the activities" of federal and regional agencies in fighting extremism.

The commission will draft proposals for the president and the government, including legal initiatives, aimed at "forming state policies" to fight extremism, the Kremlin said on its web site. It also will help draft international treaties on fighting extremism and "work out measures" to "improve" efforts by federal and regional authorities and nongovernmental organizations to counter extremism.

It will make yearly reports to the president on extremist activities in Russia and provide "organizational guidance" to permanent working groups dealing with the "harmonization" of interethnic relations in the regions.

It will be in the commission's powers to control the fulfillment of its orders by federal

and regional authorities; request and receive information from authorities at any level and from nongovernmental organizations; and invite experts in government agencies and public activists to take part in its work.

Medvedev appointed Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev as the commission head and Federal Security Service chief Alexander Bortnikov as deputy head, according to the decree [posted](#) on the Kremlin's web site.

The commission comprises 16 officials, including the ministers of defense, culture, education and science, regional development, mass media, and sports and justice; the heads of the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Investigative Committee, the Federal Migration Service and the Federal Customs Service; and three other officials.

Alexander Verkhovsky, director of the Sova Center, which tracks extremism and xenophobia, said the commission's work would be useful if it dealt with serious problems like terrorism, not "with the wide spectrum" of notions included in the government's definition of extremism.

"It's no secret that authorities often search for extremism where there isn't any but it's convenient to find," Verkhovsky said by telephone, referring to extremist charges often brought against the political opposition and human rights activists.

A 2002 federal [law](#) gives a broad definition of extremism, which, among other things, includes inciting any kind of hatred; making "patently false" public accusations against officials; obstructing the work of authorities through violence or the threat of violence; and "committing a crime out of revenge for the illegal actions of other people."

Vladimir Mukomel, top anti-extremism expert at the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said coordinating the work of government agencies was important.

"But there are serious concerns that authorities will try to suppress any kind of protest sentiment in society, which is growing, under the guise of fighting extremism," Mukomel said by telephone.

Voters will elect a new State Duma in December and cast ballots in a presidential election in March.

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst with the Center for Political Information, a think tank, questioned the need for the new commission, noting that fighting extremism is already the mandate of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee, the Interior Ministry and the FSB.

"It was probably to add a bonus to the ministers' salaries, which are not small as it is," Mukhin said.

Medvedev [declared](#) his intention to create the commission at a meeting of the State Council in late December, after some 5,500 nationalists and football fans, shouting racial slurs, clashed with police on Manezh Square in central Moscow at a protest of the killing of fan Yegor Sviridov during a brawl between fans and Caucasus natives.

In July, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin told a meeting with religious leaders that a structure

similar to the much-criticized Soviet National Affairs Ministry would be created "in the near future."

Medvedev spoke against the creation of a new ministry in December.

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