The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Expect a Showdown With the Kremlin in the Fall

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

July 09, 2012



This is the last working week for the State Duma before it adjourns for its six-week summer break. Politicians are hurrying to put the last finishing touches on President Vladimir Putin's policy of tightening the screws on the opposition and nongovernmental organizations — a campaign that has intensified significantly after Putin was inaugurated on May 7.

Last week, for example, United Russia members Alexander Khinshtein and Pavel Krasheninnikov introduced an amendment that would make defamation a criminal offense punishable by a maximum fine of 500,000 rubles ($15,200) or up to five years in prison. Less than a year ago, then-President Dmitry Medvedev had removed this very article from the Criminal Code, making defamation punishable by a fine of only 3,000 rubles ($90). This removal was part of Medvedev's efforts to liberalize and "humanize" some of the more outrageous leftovers from the Soviet period that remained in the code. But now, the authorities will have a virtual carte blanche to use libel and slander charges to intimidate and prosecute human rights activists, opposition figures and journalists.

United Russia deputies, led by the party's leader, Prime Minister Medvedev, are turning back the clock and reversing several of Medvedev's own reforms of the Criminal Code. They plan to renew the persecution of prominent dissenters who dare to criticize the authorities. Medvedev has remained silent on the subject, but it seems that nobody cares much about his opinion anymore. ⊠

Neither has Medvedev spoken out against the new law on rallies that was passed in early June restricting the constitutional right of Russians to protest. This law includes punitive measures against those using the Internet to organize protests. These repressive measures would have been unthinkable just a year ago, when Medvedev was president.

Another important feature of Putin's new regime is the way it has formed a close political union between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Kirill, who was elected with active support from the Kremlin, himself openly supports the leadership's authoritarian domestic policies.

One vivid example of this holy union is the trial against suspected members of the Pussy Riot group, who were arrested and have been held in jail for months over what is essentially a minor disorderly conduct offense. The accused could face up to seven years in prison. The hasty, biased and highly politicized trial has been marked by numerous procedural violations. The prosecutors' indictment even cites violations of Orthodox Church rules and practices, which is outrageous for a country whose Article 14 of the Constitution clearly states that the government is secular. In this sense, the trial against Pussy Riot differs little from Sharia courts in the North Caucasus.

The new regime has also opened yet another front on its war against dissenters — against nongovernmental organizations. Since Russian businesses do not support NGOs because they fear government reprisals, and since legislation does not encourage this form of charitable giving, nearly all funding for Russian NGOs comes from abroad. Under such conditions, foreign funding is the only way that thousands of NGOs in Russia can fulfill their function of charity, protecting and defending fundamental human rights and building a civil society. They are the only organizations in the country that, among other things, monitor elections, protect the environment, defend innocent political prisoners and reveal cases of corruption and other abuses by government officials. It is no surprise that most top officials find these NGOs a heavy nuisance, while some consider them a direct threat to their livelihood.

The new bill, which will likely be passed this week before the Duma recess, will deliver a crushing blow to NGOs. First, they will all be stigmatized as "foreign agents," a term that is unquestionably synonymous with "foreign spy" in Russian. The legislation burdens NGOs that receive foreign funding with onerous reporting requirements and inspections. This burden will prove unmanageable for many NGOs, forcing them to shut down operations in Russia. Third, key personnel in NGOs charged with failure to comply with these rules could face severe fines of up to 3 million rubles ($91,000) or three years in prison.

This is the most ruthless attack the authorities have waged against NGOs in the 20 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Duma has set another disturbing precedent in its crackdown against dissent. The Kremlin has become more intolerant of the few brave deputies who have been active in the protest

movement against the Putin regime, including Just Russia Deputies Dmitry Gudkov and Ilya Ponomaryov. Right now, the authorities are trying to set a precedent by filing charges against a low-level deputy, Vladimir Bessonov from the Communist Party. Last week, the Duma partially stripped Bessonov's immunity, clearing the way for criminal charges against him for allegedly striking a police officer during a December protest. This will be the first time that a deputy has been stripped of his immunity and charged as a result of his political activities. In true chekhist tradition, the authorities are starting with a minor figure, Bessonov, to set the stage for likely criminal proceedings against the most vocal leaders of the opposition in the Duma, Gudkov and Ponomaryov, perhaps on trumped-up charges that they have organized or incited "mass riots."

Amid this unprecedented crackdown, it is no surprise that the protest mood has remained strong, according to recent polls by the Levada Center. Throwing fuel into the fire, the authorities raised utilities prices, tariffs and excise taxes on July 1. Higher prices and the Kremlin's repressive measures against dissent will mean only one thing: an even sharper confrontation between the people and the Putin regime starting in September.

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