The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

This Is a Terrible Time to Be a Dictator, Mr. Putin

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

August 20, 2012



The Kremlin and the people are headed toward a new round of conflict starting in September.

Since President Vladimir Putin assumed office in May, several laws have been passed that will clamp down on the opposition, journalists, bloggers and nongovernmental organizations. These include an extrajudicial or administrative procedure for banning specific websites and blogs as well as granting the authorities the right to prosecute anyone who disagrees with Kremlin policy.

The law on NGOs has been one of the most controversial. If foreign-funded NGOs that are deemed by the authorities to be "politically active" fail to register as "foreign agents," their directors and other top officials within the organizations could be subject to huge fines and prison terms.

Several leading human rights organizations have declared that they will ignore the law

and will not register as foreign agents. These include the Moscow Helsinki Group headed by Lyudmila Alexeyeva and the For Human Rights movement headed by Lev Ponomaryov. Both organizations are highly respected in Russia and abroad.

The law requiring NGOs will come into force in November. The question is whether the authorities are prepared to bring criminal charges against Alexeyeva, Ponomaryov, the Memorial rights group and other internationally renowned human rights leaders and organizations. Will the authorities really force them to halt their activities? Will Putin dare to stand before the television cameras of the world and drag these respectable people into a courtroom on criminal charges? These are fearless individuals who once stood shoulder to shoulder with Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov and who had the courage to endure Yury Andropov's KGB and the darkest years of Leonid Brezhnev's crackdown on dissidents.

Will the Investigative Committee send dozens of leading activists to penal colonies and prisons? Will the authorities follow through on plans to censor opposition sites and blogs? Will they use the recent law recriminalizing libel and slander of government officials to imprison or give enormous fines to journalists and bloggers?

Whatever the authorities decide, the coming months will be a critical juncture in Putin's rule. The government's open attack on the opposition and peaceful protesters and its crackdown on NGOs cannot be camouflaged by branding them as business-related disputes (like the takeover of NTV in 2001), punishment for tax evasion (like the first criminal case against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky), or part of a supposed struggle against extremism (which the authorities have abused many times to intimidate and punish members of the opposition).

If Putin is allowed to censor the media, jail opposition figures and crack down on NGOs at will, his "soft authoritarianism" could easily plunge into a full-fledged dictatorship. If left uncontrolled, Putin will turn into a Russian version of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, whom Putin, notably, visited on his first official state trip after his inauguration in May.

Yet Putin has yet to take that fateful step toward dictatorship. As journalist Yulia Latynina so aptly put it, he remains in the "gray area" between autocracy and dictatorship. He stands poised at a line drawn in the sand, his fellow siloviki urging him onward toward dictatorial rule. But will Putin take that fateful step into the darkness, a political purgatory from which there is no return?

In making this decision, Putin should consider three main factors:

First, this is a terrible time for the world's dictators. Global trends favor democracies and have little room or tolerance for megalomaniac leaders whose lifelong ambition has been to seize the reins of power and never let go. The recent collapses of several Arab dictatorships serve as a stark reminder of how precarious it is to be a dictator in the new global order.

The international community has already begun enacting sanctions against Putin's regime. U.S. Congress will likely pass the Magnitsky Act in the coming months, and European countries are considering similar legislation. If Russia becomes an outright dictatorship and if human rights abuses increase in frequency and magnitude, so will the number of new

sanctions against Russia. Russia's membership in the Council of Europe may also be questioned by leading European democracies.

Second, letting the country degenerate into a dictatorship would be bad for the economy. Since 2008, growth has slowed considerably, and the economy is weaker and more dependent on raw materials exports than ever before. If the West were to impose severe sanctions in response to a further Kremlin crackdown on fundamental human rights, this would have a disastrous effect on Russia's economy, which is already under strain as a result of capital flight, the global economic slowdown and a drop in demand for natural resources.

Third, a shift toward greater political repression could provoke an unpredictable and perhaps incendiary reaction from society. The residents of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities could stage continuous protests and even acts of civil disobedience. Protests could easily switch from a political movement to a movement with a larger focus on social issues such as inflation, low salaries, health care, education and pensions. In this case, the protest movement will expand exponentially in size and scope across all of Russia. If things get really bad, workers could call strikes that would cause further breakdowns in the economy, including a shortage of consumer goods.

Unless Putin has lost his sanity, he will not cross that critical red line into dictatorship. Instead, he will prefer to remain in the gray area between autocracy and dictatorship. This would mean that the authorities would continue to exert greater pressure on civil society, employing new and more sophisticated provocations, lies and dirty tricks to maintain their hold on power in the face of serious challenges from the opposition. Nonetheless, the future belongs to the people, not Putin's regime.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition RP-Party of People's Freedom.

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/20/this-is-a-terrible-time-to-be-a-dictator-mr-putin-a17152