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The Myths of Putin's Political Repression

By Sergei Markov

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As a result of my work, I often attend events held at Western embassies in Moscow, and I am always surprised at how much the fervent opponents of President Vladimir Putin outnumber everyone else. Some of these events, such as dinners, are informal get-togethers where Western diplomats formulate their opinions of Russia, which are passed up the chain of command to become the official positions of their respective governments. But the dominance of the anti-Putin position among Moscow-based diplomats does not reflect the opinion of the majority of Russians and therefore creates a distorted picture of reality. This distortion leads to an inaccurate perception of Russia in most countries.

The West has a distorted picture of Russia. What most Western diplomats, journalists, citizens and

leaders view as Putin's political suppression is actually part of his liberalization of the political system.

Russia's opposition believes that "the authoritarian Putin regime," faced with growing political protest, has enacted a stricter policy toward the opposition and society as a whole. As a result, the evolution of Russian politics is generally evaluated in this light. But it is impossible to understand the logic of the Russian authorities within this anti-Putin, propagandistic framework.

In fact, Russian authorities are transforming the political system based on the serious challenges it faces. The main challenge is not political protest or the growth of the opposition but the growth of social activity in general. The authorities are confident that the growth of social activism is the logical outcome of the country's successful struggle through the post-Soviet period and the chaotic 1990s.

Now we see a widespread growth of social activism — for example, when hundreds of volunteers helped flood victims in Krymsk last year. In the past, if a child went missing, only the police and relatives got involved in the search. Now, thousands of volunteers will likely show up to help. Yet the political system of the 2000s was designed for a passive population and not an active one. And that system began to malfunction, leading to the mass rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. Social activity has clearly become the new norm in the country and a permanent feature of Russian life.

That is why the main task of the authorities is not to suppress social activity but to adapt the political system to it. That way, the activity will not be directed against the system, but will be carried out within the framework of the system and for its benefit. Civil activity is like water bursting to the surface: If you try to plug it, the water will only break through with greater force. But if you build channels for it, the water will flow along in a normal fashion through those conduits. The authorities are focused now on creating such channels.

New and simpler rules for registering political parties were introduced, as were direct gubernatorial elections and single-mandate districts that make it possible for new leaders to emerge. Of course, all of these steps have been implemented very carefully to avoid triggering unpredictable political developments such as those that occurred during former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's fateful era. This has been the reason for introducing municipal filters and other similar measures.

The authorities are creating a new model of interaction between public institutions and the political system. For example, some members of the Public Chamber will be elected through Internet voting. Funding for nongovernmental organizations has also been increased several fold.

But in providing civil society with greater opportunity to influence political decisions, the

authorities have faced the following problems:

1. Sovereignty. The question of an increasing number of NGOs that are funded from abroad has become a question of Russia's sovereignty. To create the necessary conditions for NGOs to play a greater role in the political system, it was necessary to reduce their dependence on foreign funding. This was the reason for the law requiring that NGOs receiving funding from abroad list themselves are foreign agents.

2. Strengthening the moral fiber of society. As social activity and political competition has grown, the authorities have consolidated support from their base electorate. This explains the series of conservative laws on social and cultural issues, such as the ban on propaganda promoting homosexuality and laws defending the rights and feelings of religious believers. I expect that additional laws will also be passed limiting immigration and increasing the role of religion. In the past, when political competition was much lower, such steps could have been ignored in favor of business, which relies on migrant workers. In addition, during an earlier period, it may have been more important to cater to "European values" by accommodating Russia's LGBT community. But now, when political survival has become more difficult, the government must make decisions favored by the majority.

3. Ensuring that the protest movement stays within the limits of the law. It is important to prevent the political struggle from descending into chaos, into a situation in which politicians deem their opponents to be not just rivals, but traitors and criminals and proclaim that "compromise is impossible." The authorities enjoy the support of the majority of the population and believe that the opposition cannot win in most elections. Under such circumstances, the only chance the opposition has to gain power is through a violent uprising or revolution, which, of course, violates the law.

To keep the political struggle within legal bounds, rallies must be tightly regulated, and any deliberate attempts to cross police cordons, which is precisely what happened at Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6, 2012, must be stopped. Violations of the laws governing protests must be met with a firm response. As long as the opposition makes no claim to seize power illegally, it can hold peaceful rallies every day of the week if it wants. But if it hopes to take control of the street and foment a revolution, it will be severely suppressed.

Thus, the new laws that have been incorrectly viewed as suppression of the opposition are really a part of the liberalization the political system at a time when Russian is experiencing a marked rise in social activism and political competition.

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

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