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Putin's War on Greenpeace

By Georgy Bovt

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All 30 crew members of the Greenpeace vessel Arctic Sunrise, including the Russian photographer on board, have been formally charged with piracy and could face up to 15 years in prison. Diplomats from the 18 different countries whose citizens now find themselves in a Russian pre-trial detention center have already become involved.

Speculation is rife as to what political game might develop around this high-profile case, with some observers suggesting a possible connection with the upcoming Winter Olympics in Sochi. Others argue that Russia's actions might prompt several countries and athletes to boycott the games over unfair treatment of the "green" activists who attempted to hang a banner on Gazprom's Prirazlomnaya oil rig located in the ecologically fragile Pechora Sea. Still others believe the outlandish conspiracy theory that the Russian authorities, who are running behind schedule on preparations for the Olympic Games, staged the incident to disrupt the games and save themselves from embarrassment. Even the fact that such crazy ideas gain currency attests to the serious nature of this scandal.

President Vladimir Putin has stepped forward to play the "good cop" by disputing the official findings of the investigators. "Of course, it is quite obvious that they are not pirates, but

formally they were trying to capture the platform, and our law enforcement agencies could not be certain exactly who might have been trying to seize the platform under the guise of Greenpeace," Putin said. That statement led some to believe that the severity of the charges would be reduced and the environmentalists simply fined and released.

However, I would not hurry to interpret Putin's words as a clear signal to law enforcement bodies that they should cease and desist. Putin has repeatedly emphasized that he cannot put pressure on investigators or the courts, saying that in Russia both are independent bodies. Of course, that does not mean they are independent in the Western understanding of the word. But by taking that position, the authorities can distance themselves from events and retain the ability to later step in if necessary as the savior or liberator of the activists. Maintaining a safe distance also enables leaders to avoid responsibility for any "excesses" committed by the siloviki, especially considering that Russia's machinery of repression has become a steamroller without any brakes.

If the president were to constantly pull in the reins of the investigators, the public might lose its deep-seated fear of them and begin turning to Putin for help. He would then have to intervene to break up every fight involving not only Greenpeace activists, but also the economic and political elites. Worse, he would have to side with one faction or another, something that is clearly not in his interests.

Putin wants to remain free to fly above the fray and to play by rules that he alone understands. In fact, it is better for leaders (not only in this case, but in all cases smacking of political interests) when investigators lack clear instructions and are left guessing as to what the president considers "going too far." At least, that is better than displaying "spineless" liberalism. A severe or cruel approach is perceived as "maintaining a firm hand," whereas leniency or liberalism is seen as weakness.

The demonstrative harshness taken toward the Greenpeace activists is comparable to the severity shown toward the three Pussy Riot members who staged an anti-Putin punk protest in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral in 2012. In that case, it eventually became evident that the authorities had decided to brutally discourage all future attempts to use religious premises for political expression — a trend that, had it continued, could have proven fatal to a multiethnic and religiously diverse Russia. Two Pussy Riot members remain behind bars, the country is debating the harsh conditions in which one of them, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, is held. To date no copycat stunts have occurred.

Russia has major plans to develop the natural resources of the Arctic. It is prepared to join the race to develop the North and stake its claim as one of the region's original pioneers. Technical difficulties that delayed construction of the Prirazlomnaya platform for years and forced its owners to buy a 30-year-old foreign-made and decommissioned platform to use as a base. Yet despite the enormous costs and the unknowns involved in Arctic drilling, the project is essentially Moscow's claim to sovereign rights in certain areas of the Arctic shelf. It became obvious that Putin was working decisively toward that goal when, while speaking near a microphone that he thought had been turned off, he referred to a Russian scientist who proposed letting international organizations manage the Arctic as a "moron."

Putin believes he should make a public example of the Greenpeace activists so that the whole

world will know it does not pay to interfere with Russia's interests in the Arctic. After all, nobody would ever dream of pulling such a stunt against the likes of Saudi Arabia or Iran because they know that the punishment would be disproportionate to the crime.

Not only did Kremlin administration head Sergei Ivanov recently speak contemptuously of Greenpeace in an interview, but the Russian leadership as a whole sincerely believes that members of the organization are paid to "carry out the orders" of Russia's enemies — in this case, its rivals for the natural resources of the Arctic. Convinced that they are correct in this assumption, the Russian authorities are prepared to push the case much further than is supposed by those who think the environmentalists will get a slap on the hand and an easy release after two weeks in detention.

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