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A Dangerous Anti-Terrorism Bill

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The State Duma has introduced another bill aimed at combating terrorism. To be sure, terrorism in Russia remains a critical problem as terrorists kill dozens of people every year. At the same time, however, Russia's intelligence agencies diligently use the fight against terrorism as a pretext for expanding their own powers, with the goal of limiting individual rights and cracking down on the opposition.

Some analysts say President Vladimir Putin struggles between two conflicting impulses: the desire to enforce conservative values and the desire to modernize society.

In an attempt to modernize, they say, Putin has allowed for more political competition. But I don't believe this.

For example, I am not convinced that the decision to allow opposition leader Alexei Navalny to run in the Moscow mayoral election in September was a step toward liberalizing Putin's autocracy. It was clear from the outset that Navalny had no chance of winning.

What's more, had incumbent Sergei Sobyanin run without a relatively strong opponent in protest-prone Moscow, the voter turnout would have probably hovered around 10 percent, which would have compromised the legitimacy of the election.

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov has long expressed his mayoral ambitions and would have posed a far greater threat to Sobyanin. It is therefore no surprise that the Kremlin and Sobyanin opted to hold early elections. The Prokhorov factor also explains why Duma deputies hastily passed a law before the September mayoral election that prohibited politicians from holding assets overseas, summarily pushing Prokhorov out of the race.

I am also not convinced that opposition candidate Yevgeny Roizman's victory in the Yekaterinburg mayoral race in September somehow signals a broader trend toward liberalization or modernization. Roizman never espoused any distinctly liberal political views and had enjoyed a successful career as a United Russia member until he tried to position himself as an opposition candidate.

But at the same time, Putin remains strongly committed to a conservative agenda in which dissent will be tightly controlled. That is precisely why Putin built his power vertical structure, making it impossible for his opponents to gain power. Putin can essentially bar any undesirable candidate from running for office, he controls the judicial system that does not punish anyone for rigging the vote in United Russia's favor, and he controls national television so that Russians never even hear of opposition politicians. Putin also frightens businesspeople from financing opposition parties or candidates. That is how Putin guarantees not only his own hold on power but the electoral victory of nearly any representative of the ruling party in any election.

The new anti-terrorism bill that permits the siloviki to gather information on those who make payments on the Internet through services like Yandex.Dengi, which the opposition has heavily relied on to attract funding, further expands the powers of Russia's political police in its constant battle against the opposition.

What remains a mystery is just how those expanded powers to restrict Russians' rights will stop future terrorist attacks. The bill's four authors — three of whom are former siloviki — have not answered that question. The authorities have never indicated that terrorists fund their operations through the Internet.

If Putin signs the so-called anti-terrorism bill into law, the only thing that will be weakened will be the civil society, not the terrorists.

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