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Critics Fear Post-Sochi Crackdown (Video)

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Members of Pussy Riot speaking to a group of journalists at the Sochi Winter Olympics in Adler on Thursday. **Eric Gaillard**

With three days to go until the Winter Olympics in Sochi draw to a close, fears are growing among many Russians that the apparent tolerance of President Vladimir Putin toward critics of his government in the run-up to the games will dissipate after the last foreign participant leaves.

The months leading up to the Olympics were marked by a political thaw, with an amnesty in December freeing several figures widely seen as political prisoners and opposition leaders allowed to participate in regional elections in September. Both moves were welcomed, but some observers were skeptical, saying the leniency was nothing more than the Kremlin trying to improve the country's image ahead of the Games.

"When the festivities end, will international partners watch Russia as closely as they are now?

This is questionable, and that is why we fear a crackdown," Tanya Lokshina, Russia program director at Human Rights Watch, told The Moscow Times by phone.

A European ambassador who spoke on condition of anonymity told The Moscow Times that his embassy had been approached by several nongovernmental organizations expressing concerns about a possible crackdown after the Games.

Ahead of the Olympics, several things happened that observers say might have been too good to be true.

In a move that shocked many Russia watchers, several high-profile figures known for their fierce opposition to and criticism of Putin were released from prison shortly before the Games. This included former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev, as well as two Pussy Riot musicians and four defendants in the Bolotnoye trial over anti-Kremlin riots in Moscow.

In addition, 30 Greenpeace activists from 16 different countries were pardoned and allowed to return home after being detained in the Arctic Sea in September for scaling an oil rig that belonged to state giant Gazprom.

Apart from early releases and pardons, opposition politicians were allowed to participate in elections — an occurrence that critics say is rare.

In the summer, Alexei Navalny and Yevgeny Roizman were registered to run in September mayoral elections in their respective cities of Moscow and Yekaterinburg. The two were known as outspoken critics of the government, a fact which made many question how they were able to get official permission to participate in elections.

Prompting more speculation, in October a court replaced prison terms for Navalny and his business partner Pyotr Ofitserov that had been issued in July with suspended sentences in an embezzlement case. Also that month, the Constitutional Court deemed illegal a federal law passed in July that permanently banned those previously convicted of grave crimes from running for office.

There were signs of growing leniency even before that.

In July, Putin ordered lawmakers to change a controversial law introducing fines for nongovernmental organizations that fail to register as foreign agents if they receive funding from abroad and are involved in political activities — an apparent response to critics' warnings that the original legislation only vaguely defined "political activities."

The relevant amendments, which were intended to limit political activities to elections and public opinion surveys, have not yet been submitted to the State Duma.

Experts say these measures are minor concessions aimed at improving the world's opinion of Russia amid the refusal of several foreign leaders — including the leaders of the U.S., France and Germany — to attend the Olympics.

"It is absolutely clear that ahead of the Olympics, the authorities, and Putin personally, were put in such conditions ... that they had to demonstrate that they were ready to hear the signals

being sent from the West," Lev Ponomaryov, head of the For Human Rights movement, said in an interview in his Moscow office.

Predictions of Putin's Post-Sochi Plan

A Moscow Times reporter sat down with veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov to hear his prediction on what course President Vladimir Putin's policies will take after the Sochi Winter Olympics end.

Politicians, analysts and rights activists have been warning since at least January that Putin's leniency toward his opponents is temporary.

Twelve people, among them rights activists, opposition politicians and analysts, were asked by The Moscow Times to give their forecast of the Russian president's political course after the Olympics.

Two pro-Kremlin pundits said there would be no crackdown on government critics, while three others said restrictions of civil freedoms would continue in parallel to liberal reforms.

Observers link their predictions of restricted freedom and a crackdown on opponents of the regime to Putin's dwindling popularity and the country's worsening economic conditions, against the backdrop of an ongoing public revolt in Ukraine that authorities apparently fear could serve as an example for Russian activists.

The feared crackdown — or "tightening of the screws," as many call it — may also be conducted by powerful law enforcement officials, the so-called siloviki, who acquired great influence during Putin's 13 years of rule as president and prime minister.

Authorities will likely target freedom of speech in the mass media and on the Internet first, and only after that apply tough sentences to political protesters, observers said.

Ponomaryov, a veteran human rights defender, said he based his forecast on the "falling public support" of Putin, which requires the president to "rely on the conservative part of society, on the advice of his spin doctors," and therefore restrict freedoms.

Boris Nemtsov, co-chairman of the liberal opposition party RPR-Parnas, echoed Ponomaryov, saying "repressions will increase in direct proportion to the decline of [Putin's] rating."

Even if Putin wanted to make liberal reforms, "his circle would not allow him to do so," since they care about their own profit, Ponomaryov said.

"Siloviki are not particularly intelligent people, they took the amnesty as a personal insult, thinking 'why are we putting them behind bars if they are just getting out ahead of time?'" Ponomaryov said, referring to law enforcement officials and Putin's past as head of the Federal Security Service.

"They are preparing to make up for this after the Olympics," he said.

Nemtsov said he expected a crackdown in "all the spheres that Putin deems dangerous for his rule — everything that his paranoid brain will suggest to him," including political,

environmental and human rights activists.

Prominent historian and journalist Nikolai Svanidze said he was concerned about freedom of speech being repressed, something that could become a reality in the near future in light of the economic downturn and protests in neighboring Ukraine, he said.

"With worsening economic conditions, authorities want to rid the people of negative information," Svanidze said by phone.

Speaking about the role of protests in Ukraine, he described them as a "universal irritant," saying "the situation in Ukraine shows that giving people freedom turns into Maidan."

Maidan is the name of the square in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev where the protests first unfolded, the epicenter of the protest movement there.

Hints of Impending Repression

One sign of the growing power of law enforcement agencies is the notion of "objective truth" introduced in legislative amendments submitted to the State Duma in February, Ponomaryov said. A clause establishing the notion of "objective truth" would allow courts to convict defendants in criminal cases even when there are doubts about their guilt.

"This is a major theoretical groundwork for launching repressions on a full scale," Ponomaryov said about the "objective truth" bill.

The bill was drafted by a pro-Kremlin lawmaker at the request of Russia's chief investigator, Alexander Bastrykin.

Critics also cited ongoing cases as strong indications of more repression to come. Among the cases mentioned were the trials against eight suspected participants in alleged riots on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploschad in May 2012, Krasnodar region ecologist Yevgeny Vitishko and former opposition-minded Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov.

Nemtsov also cited a police raid in early February on the apartment of economist Alexander Sokolov, who had been researching corruption linked to preparations for the Sochi Olympics. Police said the search was part of a probe over extremism charges against an unidentified person, and that Sokolov was a witness.

Other signs of an impending crackdown on freedom of speech include the permission given to the federal media watchdog to block websites without a court order, which took effect on Feb. 1, and the removal of opposition-leaning Dozhd television from several cable networks in January over a controversial poll, observers said.

Observers said another more recent scandal was yet another bad omen for freedom of speech. Writer Viktor Shenderovich faced a backlash last week by media pundits on state television over his remarks comparing the Sochi Olympics to the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany.

His supporters have argued that the uproar over Shenderovich's comments, which were made on a blog hosted by opposition-leaning Ekho Mosvky, may serve as a pretext for authorities to bring Ekho Mosvky under Kremlin control.

In addition to the politically-tinged trials and alleged censorship, there are two legal initiatives in the works that would restrict popular participation in elections. One of them is a bill passed by the Duma in the final reading in February; it bans people formerly convicted of grave crimes from running for governor or president for 10 to 15 years after they have finished their sentences.

The other initiative is a reform of the local government prepared by United Russia lawmakers that would abolish direct elections of mayors in large cities.

That bill has not yet been passed.

Liberalization Forecasts

Some observers disagreed with predictions of a "tightening of the screws," saying the same conditions cited by many critics as a reason to expect a crackdown in fact give good cause to expect the opposite.

Gennady Gudkov, a former opposition Duma deputy who was expelled from A Just Russia for his participation in large-scale anti-government protests in 2011 and 2012, argued that the "growing economic recession" in Russia "makes repressions dangerous for authorities."

"I think authorities understand that," Gudkov said by phone, apparently hinting at authorities' desire to avoid repeating earlier large-scale protests.

Pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergei Markov gave mixed interpretations of the country's leadership policies, saying "liberalization" would continue alongside preventing mass riots and protecting conservative values.

"The authorities will authorize mass actions to the maximum extent possible so that they happen safely, just like in Europe, but if it turns into a Maidan-like scenario, they will terminate such actions violently," Markov said by phone, referring to ongoing protests in Ukraine.

Markov said that "liberalization started before the [2012] presidential elections" and was "in no way linked to the Olympics." The Games "somewhat influenced" the amnesty for Pussy Riot and Khodorkovsky but "were not a key factor," he said.

Markov dismissed predictions of freedom of speech coming under fire and rallies being restricted, saying the authorities were "acting in the interests of the majority."

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