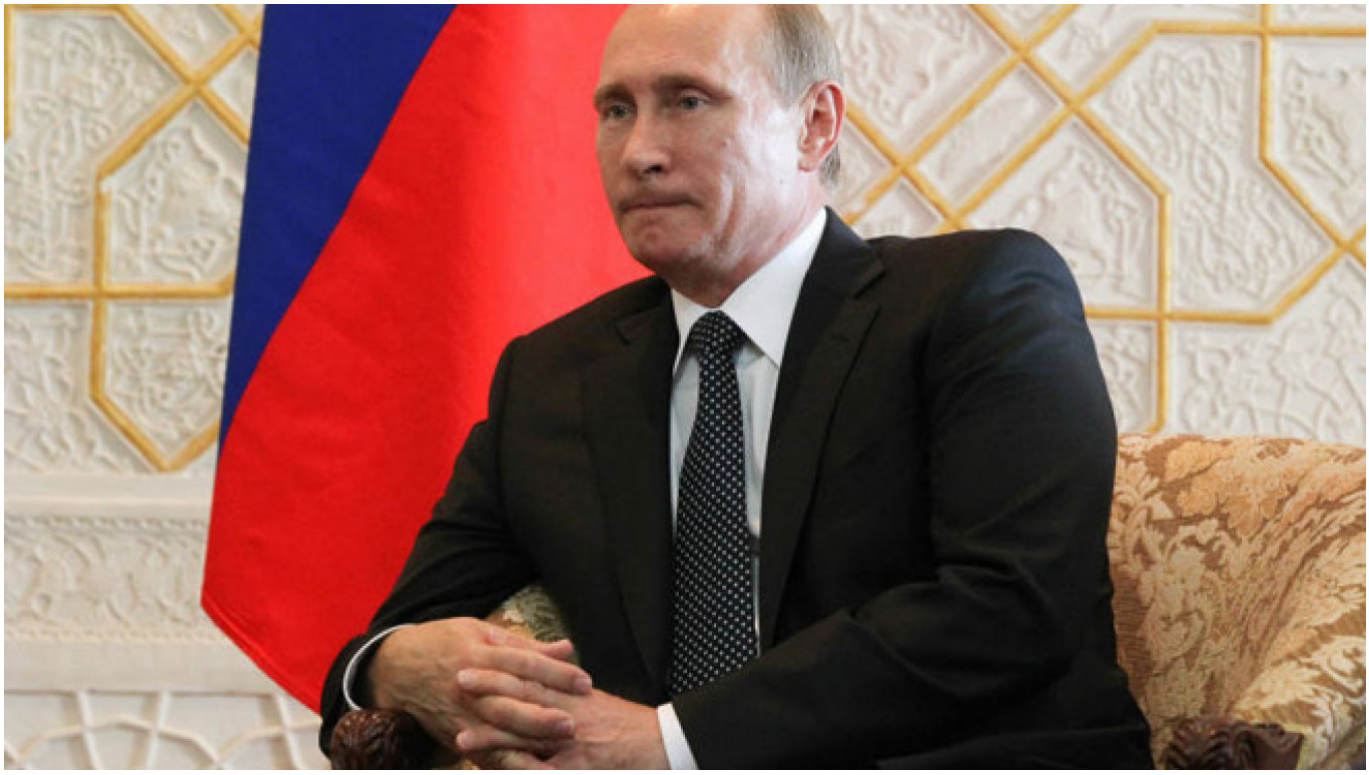
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Is Moving Away From Hard-Line Siloviki

By Gordon M. Hahn

December 03, 2014



Not to compare Putin to Stalin, but during the Stalin era when the collectivization campaign sparked a famine and other "excesses," the Soviet leader put a stop to the campaign with an article titled "Dizzy With Success," claiming that Communist Party activists had gotten carried away and exceeded their writ. A month ago President Vladimir Putin began reining in Russia's ultra-statist traditionalists and drew a clear line beyond which their traditional statist campaign against alleged "fifth columnists" must not go.

More recently, several steps taken by the Russian government and courts seem to signal that the line needs to be brought back still further. Thus it appears that domestically at least Putin does not see himself as having been chased into a corner. His high popularity ratings logically allow him to forego any excessive crackdown on the domestic opposition.

A month ago an important but ignored signal came in an article published in the government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta that drew a clear line over which "conservative" or patriotic statists should not step. It was drawn at the threshold of any substantive re-Sovietization.

The article — actually a letter-style statement from one of Russia's best-known and popular actors, Yevgeny Mironov — castigates an ostensible Russian patriot, Yury Polyakov, editor-in-chief of cultural newspaper Kultura, for condemning the great Russian writer and dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose works, particularly "The Gulag Archipelago," helped pave the way for the Soviet Communist regime's dissolution.

Polyakov's commentary called on Russians not to make a "cult figure" out of Solzhenitsyn in the run-up to the 10th anniversary of his death. He claims falsely that the great writer "left" the Soviet Union when in fact he was forcibly deported. Polyakov also claims that while in emigration he "called upon the Americans to start a war against the Soviet Union."

In his response, Mironov calls Polyakov a "scoundrel" and says the only thing that can save him from that moniker is to "ask forgiveness from Solzhenitsyn's widow and all those who had to witness his lowliness." A week later Putin visited Mironov's theater on Russian Unity Day on Nov. 4. These events seemed to be signaling Putin's support for limits on the statists' ideology.

More recent steps signal a rollback of the statists' campaign. First, Gazprom Media revoked the firing a few weeks ago of a journalist from its popular oppositionist radio station Ekho Moskvy for insulting Sergei Ivanov, the head of Putin's presidential administration.

Long-time Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov rejected the firing of Alexander Plyushchev and threatened to go to court on the basis of the station's statutes stipulating that only the station's editor-in-chief has the right to fire station employees. Gazprom Media director Mikhail Lesin threatened to fire Venediktov. Now Plyushchev has been reinstated at Ekho Moskvy.

Second, a Moscow court rejected a defamation suit against Putin's long-time nemesis, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, filed by populist-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR).

Third, the Russian parliament's upper house, the Federation Council, has begun drafting amendments to Russia's new law stipulating that Russian citizens' Internet data must be stored in Russia and introducing the concept of a blogger. The law defines a blogger as a person or entity owning an Internet page through which a large amount of material is distributed and that has more than 3,000 readers and requires them to register with Russia's information technology and communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor.

Thus bloggers are now subject to the same legislation as journalists — for example, Russia's strict libel and anti-extremism laws. The amendments are designed to provide a more precise definition of a blogger. Roskomnadzor has invited representatives from Twitter and Facebook to discuss the law and future amendments.

Fourth, on Nov. 17, Putin backed a proposal from Human Rights Commissioner Ella Pamfilova to establish a procedure for removing NGOs from the register of foreign agents after their foreign funding ends. Upon returning to the presidency, Putin signed a law requiring that NGOs receiving foreign funding and involved in politics register as "foreign agents."

Fifth, popular and democratic opposition-oriented Russian musician Andrei Makarevich won

a lawsuit and a 500,000 ruble ($10,000) settlement against national Communist writer and political commentator Alexander Prokhanov for an article he wrote criticizing Makarevich for giving a concert in Ukraine a few months ago. Prokhanov is a Stalinist ideologist close to extremists among Russia's siloviki and was a supporter of the August 1991 hard-line coup.

Sixth, Bloomberg reports on the basis of information obtained from five separate Russian government officials that Putin is planning to announce an economic liberalization policy and new, aggressive measures to fight corruption, in the annual presidential state of the federation address set for Dec. 4. The announcement is reportedly the result of a victory of the more liberal group led by Prime Minister and former President Dmitry Medvedev over the hard-line siloviki led by Sergei Ivanov and Igor Sechin.

The likelihood is yet another effort to fight corruption. The Kremlin will seek to remove the burden of constant inspection and harassment of small and medium-sized businesses by government departments rather than a serious privatization of state assets and restructuring the economy. However, the latter cannot be excluded.

Putin likes to retain room for maneuver and has changed course and liberalized before — for example, during the Medvedev presidency's domestic and foreign political thaw. He is also a practical and relatively moderate politician by Russian standards and could very well be concerned about the more extremist tone of traditional statists since the Ukrainian crisis began.

Their campaign against fifth columnists and its harsh tone, occurring on the background of the Ukraine crisis and economic decline, risk driving elite liberals away from Putin and splitting the regime elite.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/03/putin-is-moving-away-from-hard-line-siloviki-a41959