

Russian Minister: Security Concerns Justify Restricting Civil Rights

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Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev

Russia's interior minister said restricting civil rights is justifiable if security considerations demand it, according to a television interview that was broadcast Thursday night and prompted criticism from human rights advocates.

Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev told NTV television that police and security agencies must “tighten the screws” in case of unspecified major threats.

“There is a time for tightening, and there is a time for loosening,” Kolokoltsev said. “But in any case, when there is a need for tightening, we are obliged to do it. Because for the sake of the common good, it's fine to give up something, by encroaching upon the rights and duties of citizens, but of a much smaller number than could be hurt by some kind or other of dangerous situations.”

The prominent human rights advocate and founder of Moscow Helsinki Group, Lyudmila Alexeyeva, said the government has been chipping away at Russians' rights for years, and warned that Kolokoltsev's subordinates may interpret his interview as a go-ahead for disregarding citizens' rights, the Interfax news agency reported.

“They have been tightening the screws here for a long time, and I haven't noticed the arrival of a period when the screws were being loosened up,” Alexeyeva was quoted as saying.

Since President Vladimir Putin initially came to power in 2000, television broadcasts on all the major networks have turned increasingly pro-Kremlin, observers have been reporting large-scale violations during elections and reputable news portals that criticized the government have been shut down in the country as “extremist.”

Ever since the large-scale anti-Kremlin protests on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square in May 2012 — which were sparked by Putin's decision to run for a third presidential term and which led to lengthy prison convictions for a number of participants — Russia has not seen any major pro-democracy demonstrations.

A survey by the independent Levada Center pollster earlier this year indicated that 61 percent of Russians believe restricting democratic rights and principles is acceptable for the sake of “order.” About 21 percent of respondents said democracy should take precedence, even if it expands the rights of criminals or other “destructive elements.”

This compares to a peak of 81 percent who thought law and order were more important than democracy in April 2000 — less than a year after a series of apartment building bombings killed more than 300 people in Moscow and other cities.

This year's poll was conducted in late March among 1,600 people in 46 Russian regions, and gave a margin of error of no more than 3.4 percentage points.

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