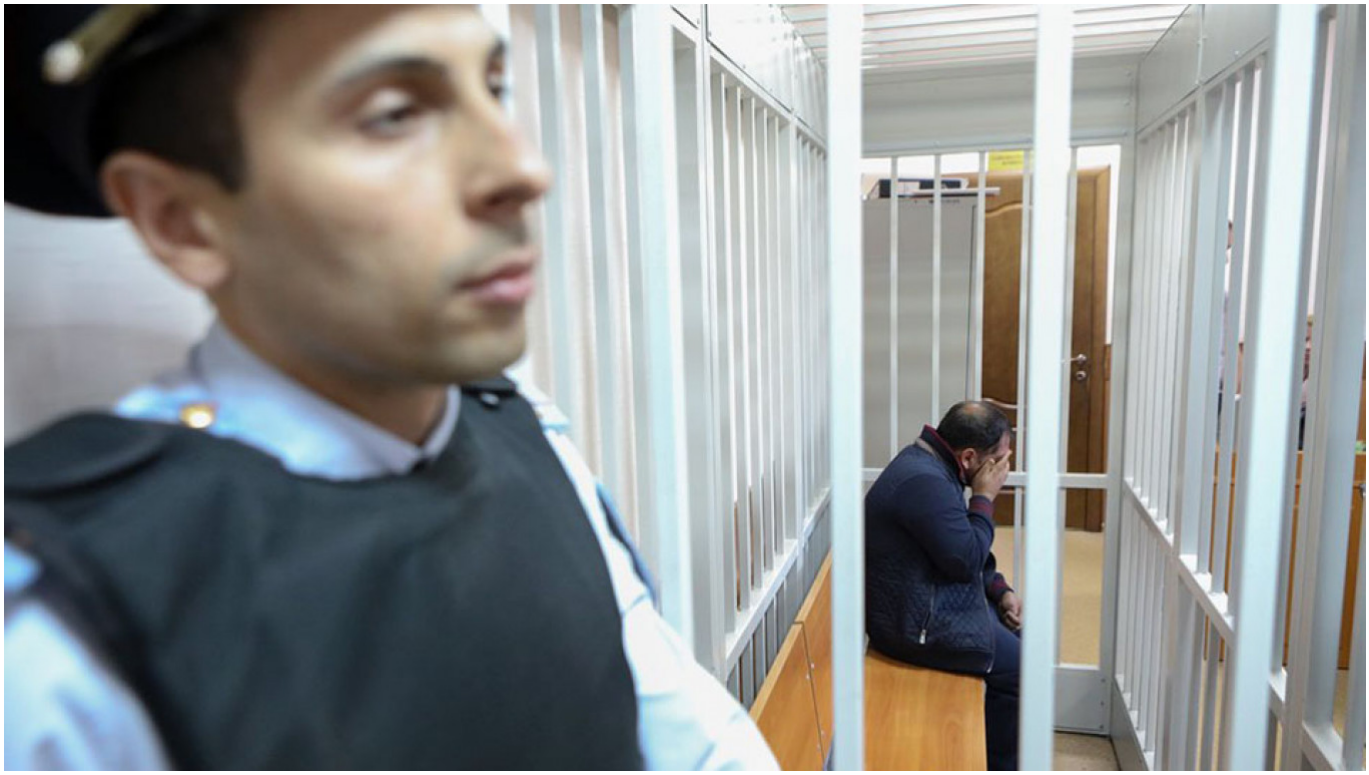
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Most Russians Charged for 'Disrespecting' Authorities Insulted Putin – Rights Group

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Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva news Agency

A majority of Russians charged under a law banning "blatant disrespect" toward the authorities have been disrespectful toward President Vladimir Putin, according to research by the Agora human rights group.

Sept. 29 marked six months since Russia imposed up to 300,000 rubles in fines and 15 days in jail for repeated "blatant disrespect" toward government institutions including Putin. Critics have condemned the law as "direct censorship."

Of the 45 cases opened for "disrespecting" the authorities during these six months, 26 were opened for "disrespecting" Putin, Agora said in a report.

"The revival of such an archaic norm in Russia in 2019 shows that the amount and the degree of public criticism of the president have exceeded the limit of the Kremlin's patience," the

group said.

Eighteen of 23 court-imposed fines were in cases involving "disrespect" of Putin, Agora said. Five "disrespect" cases were still in court when the rights group published its report Monday.

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People living outside Moscow who are not political activists or public figures were most likely to be prosecuted under the law, the Agora report continued. "It's reasonable to assume that the remoteness of the vast majority of cases from major cities was not accidental," the rights group said.

About 70% of offending messages had been posted on the Vkontakte social network, according to the report.

The Kremlin has reportedly instructed law enforcement officials to stop prosecuting people en masse under the new law. Police were told that only those who insult the presidency, legislature and the judiciary as institutions should be held accountable, media cited sources close to the Kremlin as saying over the summer.

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