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Putin Calls to Step Up Fight Against Destabilization

By AFP

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Russia's Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov (L) and Vladimir Putin. **kremlin.ru**

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday called on prosecutors to increase pressure on "attempts to destabilize" Russia's domestic situation amid the Ukraine offensive.

Moscow has heightened its crackdown on critical voices since sending troops to Ukraine last year, introducing new legislation to silence dissent.

"I ask you to react harshly to attempts to destabilize the socio-political situation in the country," Putin said during a meeting with the Russian Prosecutor General's Office.

"Prosecutors should be more active in countering extremism," Putin added.

Moscow has used the extremist label to target opposition figures and civil society organizations.

The organization of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny was in 2021 labeled "extremist," enabling the detention of several of his supporters and others to be sent into exile abroad.

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Russia's list of extremist organizations includes jihadist groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, and since 2022 the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, U.S. tech giant Meta.

Last year, 23 foreign NGOs were declared "undesirable" in Russia, prosecutor general Igor Krasnov said during the meeting Wednesday.

Since the beginning of the Ukraine offensive, Russia has passed new legislation against critics, including a law penalizing what authorities deem "fake news" about the army.

Authorities arrested at least 19,500 people protesting against the conflict, according to a tally from rights monitoring group OVD-Info.

The conflict also triggered a string of arson attacks on military conscription offices.

On Wednesday, a Russian military court sentenced 22-year-old Kirill Butylin to 13 years in prison for setting fire to an enlistment office in a town outside Moscow, Russian news agencies reported.

Putin also told prosecutors to reinforce "the protection of the fundamental rights of servicemen, participants and veterans of the special military operation" in Ukraine.

"We are creating large-scale positive changes aimed at strengthening the sovereignty of the country and its future," Putin said.

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