

## FPC Briefing: What happened to the 'Russian Spring'? Putin's Third Term Characterised by Increasingly Repressive Measures

Catherine Owen, University of Exeter

In the first six months of his third term as Russian President, Vladimir Putin has distanced himself from the 'liberal' approach of his predecessor, Dmitry Medvedev, moving instead towards a more oppressive style of rule. Widely seen as a knee-jerk reaction to mass civil unrest that began in December 2011 after fraudulent parliamentary elections, Putin's crackdown on critical voices in the country can be divided into two main strategies: the first consists of the passing of new laws aimed to discourage mass protest and restrict the expression of dissenting viewpoints, while the second involves the outright persecution of his critics. What evidence do we have for these strategies and what do they mean for Russia's opposition movement which, when it emerged just under a year ago, was expected to signify a new dawn for civic activism in the country?

### Repressive Legislation

Since his inauguration in May 2012 a series of laws restricting key freedoms of expression, association and assembly have been pushed through the Duma, taking advantage of the summertime lull in political activity as people leave the city to spend time on their dachas.

- 1) *Increased fines for unapproved rallies.* In the first four days of his Presidency, Putin introduced this controversial law dramatically increasing the fines for unsanctioned demonstrations. It was fast-tracked through parliament so as to coincide with an anti-Putin demonstration in June and raised the maximum penalty for attending an unauthorised rally from 5,000 to 300,000 roubles (around £6,000), an impossible sum for the average protester. Likewise, organizers of protests that result in harm to people or property now face fines of up to 300,000 roubles. Offenders unable to pay the fines should be sentenced to between two and two hundred hours of community service.
- 2) *Internet Restriction.* This law came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> November and created a blacklist of websites deemed to incorporate harmful or illegal content, ostensibly in order to protect children. However, while the law's wording is directed at websites promoting child pornography, narcotics and self-harm, it also allows for any kind of online material deemed dangerous by the government to be blocked by court order. More than 180 sites are currently on the list, which itself is not public, though it is possible to search<sup>1</sup> for blocked IP addresses. On November 21<sup>st</sup> the whole of YouTube was 'mistakenly' added to the blacklist for a couple of hours, when in fact only a few pages were supposed to have been banned, inadvertently demonstrating how easily whole sections of the internet can now be shut down in Russia.
- 3) *'Foreign Agents' Law.* Signed into the legislature by Putin on 21<sup>st</sup> July, this infamous law came into effect on 21<sup>th</sup> November 2012. It requires NGOs which, 'regardless of the goals and aims set out in their charter, organise and conduct political activities which influence government decision-making' to register with the Justice Ministry as 'foreign agents', to present a financial report to the authorities once a quarter, to co-operate with annual audits by Russian authorities, and to state on all online and print materials that they are 'foreign agents'. Failure to comply with the law could lead to a suspension of the organisation's activities for a period of up to six months, fines between 300,000 and 500,000 roubles, or up to two years imprisonment. However, while the law exempts those organisations working in spheres of science, the arts, sports, health promotion, social support, environmental

---

<sup>1</sup> Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 'Federal'nyi Zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 20 iulya 2012 g. N 212-F3', July 2012 <http://rg.ru/2012/07/23/nko-dok.html>

protection, and activities promoting philanthropy and volunteering, it does not include a definition of 'political activity'. According to the Kremlin<sup>2</sup>, approximately 1,000 of Russia's 230,000 NGOs will have to register, though at the time of writing not a single one has done so.

- 4) *Treason*. This amendment to the legal definition of treason came into effect on 14<sup>th</sup> November, expanding it to include not only the handing over of state secrets to foreign actors, but also any assistance given to a foreign state, organisation or individual working directly against Russia's security. It also gives the FSB the right to carry out indefinite surveillance on people suspected of divulging state secrets. Anyone found in possession of material considered to be a state secret can now be imprisoned for up to twenty years.
- 5) *Offending the sentiments of religious believers*. The Duma is currently working on a draft law that would make insulting religious feelings a criminal offence punishable by fines of up to 300,000 roubles, 200 hours of community service or three years behind bars. Representatives of Russia's Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish communities have spoken out in favour of the law, but human rights activists, artists and academics have argued that the law will lead to censorship.

### **Persecution of Activists**

Relying on the tried-and-tested methods of finding an apolitical legal pretext to arrest critics or on handing out disproportionately long sentences for relatively minor offences, the Putin government is attempting systematically to clear the political arena of its opponents. Many activists are in prison, under house arrest or are forbidden from leaving their city. The precise number of political prisoners in Russia varies widely due to definitional issues, but one group places the figure at close to two hundred<sup>3</sup>. Below is a selection of some of the most recent, high-profile cases.

*The 6<sup>th</sup> May Nineteen*- Clashes between police and protesters came during a demonstration on the eve of Putin's inauguration: a proportion of the 20,000 strong crowd threw stones and bottles at riot police, who retaliated with an overwhelming display of force, indiscriminately beating protesters with batons, firing pepper spray into the crowd and detaining hundreds of individuals, twisting their arms and dragging them along the ground. Nineteen demonstrators were charged with mass rioting and attacking police officers, and twelve remain in pre-trial confinement to this day. On 10<sup>th</sup> November the first defendant to be sentenced, Maksim Luzyanin, received four and a half years imprisonment. He is the only defendant to plead guilty to the charges, co-operating fully with the investigation in the hope of receiving a reduced sentence; his sentence was seen as unduly harsh by activist and legal communities. Another defendant, Vladimir Akimenkov, is going blind in prison, and without immediate medical attention will completely lose his sight.

*Left Front*- On 5<sup>th</sup> October, NTV television station aired an anti-opposition film which appeared to show Sergei Udaltsov and Leonid Razvozhayev of the Left Front soliciting Georgian officials for funds. On 17<sup>th</sup> October the Investigative Committee (similar to the United States' FBI) opened a criminal case against the two men, and against Udaltsov's assistant Konstantin Lebedev. Razvozhayev fled to Ukraine but was abducted by masked men in Kiev on 19<sup>th</sup> October and held for three days before reappearing outside a Moscow courthouse. He says he was forced to sign a 'confession' implicating himself, Udaltsov and head of the Co-ordination Council of the Opposition, Alexei Navalny. On 26<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, Russia plans to register 'foreign agent' NGOs, Miriam Elder, July 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/02/russia-register-foreign-agent-ngos>

<sup>3</sup> Soyuz Solidarnosti s Politzaklyuchyonnyimi, <http://www.politzyki.ru/politzyki/ves-spisok/22379.html>

October, Udaltsov was charged with plotting mass disorder<sup>4</sup> with funds from Georgia, a crime which could see him jailed for up to ten years. Recently, the Investigative Committee has launched an inquiry into Left Front, a move which could easily lead to a banning of the organisation as 'extremist'.

*Alexei Navalny*-One of the leading figures of the opposition, Alexei Navalny was charged with embezzlement by the Investigative Committee, according to which, in 2009 he conspired with a state-owned timber company near the Ural Mountains to steal a huge quantity of timber valuing 16 million roubles. If found guilty, Navalny could spend between five and ten years in prison. He has been told not to leave Moscow.

*Tanya Lokshina*- At the beginning of October, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch who focusses on the troubled Caucasus region, Tanya Lokshina, received a number of menacing text messages from an unknown sender, which indicated she had been under close surveillance. The messages physically threatened Lokshina and her unborn child, and referred to plans she had only spoken about over the telephone. The messages stopped when Lokshina reported them to the police. However, such incidents are common among researchers and academics working in spheres inconvenient to the Kremlin: many high-profile critics have endured surveillance, phone tapping, threats and harassment, a strategy that is clearly intended to intimidate them into giving up their work. Lokshina is now in the United States until the spring.

*Pussy Riot*- The case which captured global imagination: three members of an all-female punk band were jailed for attempting to play an anti-Putin song inside Moscow's Christ the Saviour Church. The group was arrested ten days after the performance of their so-called 'Punk Prayer' on 21<sup>st</sup> February, were denied bail and, on 17<sup>th</sup> August, were sentenced to two years in a penal colony. Later, one member successfully appealed this decision, claiming that she had been prevented from taking part in the performance by church security.

### **The current surge of repression**

What is causing the current surge in repression? On the one hand the dual strategies outlined here demonstrate the extent to which Putin was unnerved by the protests preceding his return to power, and can be seen as an attempt at basic regime security, a drive to protect his precarious power vertical, built on the shoulders of clientelistic energy tycoons and *siloviki*. On the other, his deep suspicion of Western finance, research and institutions and the liberal ideology that accompanies them follows from the statist agenda of patriotic allegiance, historical revisionism and state-driven capitalism that drives policy more generally in Putin's Russia. This dangerous mix of fear and nationalism, the former amplifying the latter, has cost the Russian public a number of fundamental domestic freedoms.

But what has happened to the democracy movement that, less than a year ago, brought crowds of 100,000 onto the streets of Moscow, prompting journalists and commentators to herald a 'Russian Spring'<sup>5</sup>, a 'political reawakening'<sup>6</sup>? Let us remember that, in contrast to the turbulence of the Yeltsin years, Putin's rule has been characterised by an unwritten social contract between the elite and the public in which the majority of the latter accept restrictions on their freedom in return for financial and political stability, while the dissenting minority are marginalised. When the protests happened last winter, it seemed as if the public were finally calling this contract into question.

---

<sup>4</sup> BBC, Russian leftist Sergei Udaltsov charged with conspiracy, October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20093232>

<sup>5</sup> Wall Street Journal December The Russian Spring Has Begun, Andrei Piontkovsky, December 2011  
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203518404577094780010444466.html>

<sup>6</sup> BBC, Russian election: Biggest protests since fall of USSR, December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16122524>

However, the past six months have shown that this is not the case: numbers on the streets during opposition rallies are declining; Russian newspapers have claimed that the protest season is over; and opinion poll results show that mass demonstrations are supported only by a shrinking minority<sup>7</sup>. The people on the street are the young, educated, middle-classes who reside in Moscow and St Petersburg and holiday in Europe. From the rest, Putin still enjoys approval ratings of over 60%, which, although down from 80% in previous years, cannot be said to indicate a break in the contract.

The opposition, meanwhile, has been slow to coalesce into a unified political bloc. It was only at the end of October 2012 that elections were held for the 45 members of the Russian Opposition Co-ordinating Council, founded in an attempt to re-galvanise the flagging protest movement and create a formal, genuine opposition to the Putin regime. So far the Council has met once and is already blighted by the familiar split between revolutionaries and reformers. It is unlikely that this Council will play any meaningful role in the move away from Putinism.

Liberal professionals within the NGO community in Russia believe that Putinist isolationism cannot work long-term in an interconnected world in which Russia is also a member of United Nations, the Council of Europe and other institutions of globalisation. Without any real challenge to Putin inside the country, they are anxiously waiting for the Magnitsky List<sup>8</sup> to come into force, which will see the United States and perhaps the UK and Europe ban dozens of high-ranking Russian officials who are also key violators of human rights from entering their countries. NGO leaders are vowing to drag cases of the 'foreign agents' law through the European Court of Human Rights, and it can be expected that the overall number of Russian cases in Strasbourg will continue to grow. However, the strength of the international community vis-à-vis the domestic regime cannot be taken for granted: China is an active member of various international institutions, yet bans human rights groups and suppresses opposition at home. Indeed, it could be precisely this model that Putin is trying to emulate.

Although it is unclear how stringently the new laws will be implemented, everyday life for the majority in Russia is likely to get worse before it gets better: the on-going global financial crisis combined with Russia's weak infrastructure and endemic corruption means that it will become increasingly difficult for Putin to retain his side of the bargain. People are beginning to experience greater repressions but are seeing little improvement in living standards. Indeed only a few days ago he warned<sup>9</sup> of job losses and budget revenue shortfalls resulting from Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation. The Putin contract may not be tenable for much longer. It can only be hoped that this situation will drive more people to call for change.

---

<sup>7</sup> Levada Center, 'Protestnye Nastroyeniya Rossiyan v Oktyabre', October 2012 <http://www.levada.ru/30-10-2012/protestnye-nastroeniya-rossiyan-v-oktyabre>

<sup>8</sup> Gazeta.RU, Magnitsky list to be passed this week in US Congress, November 2012, [http://en.gazeta.ru/news/2012/11/12/a\\_4848961.shtml](http://en.gazeta.ru/news/2012/11/12/a_4848961.shtml)

<sup>9</sup> Vesti.ru, 'Putin: WTO nye Pomeshaet Podderzhivat' Natsional'nuyu Ekonomiku', November 2012, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=965111&cid=6>