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COMMENT

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# The first 100 days of Putin's presidency see a tightening of the screws

If Dmitry Medvedev was conciliatory in his final months as president, then Vladimir Putin seems intent on a more combative approach. But the Putin administration's confident moves to re-establish order hide a deeper fear of more protests and a possible colour revolution scenario ahead of the autumn regional elections.

In fact, the fallout from the most recent wave of protests, when up to 20 000 took to the streets of Moscow on May 6 and 7 during Putin's inauguration, is still being felt. Police continue to question and hold participants, while the 'Memorial' international civil rights group took the unusual step in July of declaring 13 detainees 'political prisoners', owing to the 'clear political character' of their arrests. The high profile court cases of the female punk group Pussy Riot, as well as political activist Aleksei Navalny (charged with embezzlement on July 30), indicate that the authorities are ready to use intimidation and coercion in an attempt to quell dissent.

However, alongside these reactive measures to punish the May protesters, Putin's return has also witnessed frantic efforts on the part of law-makers to strengthen the power vertical ahead of the autumn elections. Since May 7, the United Russia-led State Duma has introduced increasingly repressive legislation, including new Internet regulations, the return of libel to the criminal code and amendments to the 2004 law 'On Assemblies, Rallies, Demonstrations, Processions and Picketing' that could see huge fines for those taking part in future mass-actions. These latter amendments, which came into effect on June 9, 2012, include fines of up to 7 000 euros for individual participants and 25 000 euros for protest organisers.

If protesters feel that the Kremlin is unfairly targeting their pockets, then some NGOs may share that feeling. On July 13, 2012, the State Duma passed a law designed to clarify the sources of funding for Non-Commercial Organisations, essentially creating a new category of 'foreign agent' for those NGOs engaged in 'political activities' and receiving financial assistance from abroad. At face value, this legislation will make little difference to the day-to-day functioning of NGOs. Legislation enacted in 2006 already requires NGOs to clarify their funding sources, while supporters of this new law are quick to point out that America's analogous 1938 *Foreign Agents Registration Act* is much stricter in its requirements. However, if the English term 'foreign agent' carries the more benign meaning of 'foreign representative', then the Russian translation carries a clearer and more sinister connotation of 'foreign spy'. For a general public that has been nurtured on a steady discourse of foreign plots and 'spy mania', the Kremlin may be about to add another significant point of control over society by discrediting sources of alternative information.

However, the 'foreign agent' law is just one of several developments affecting civil society that have accompanied Putin's May arrival in office. Putin's new presidential overseer of domestic politics, Vyacheslav Volodin, has been embroiled in an on-going conflict with the Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights — the body charged with advising the President on human rights issues. The main source of contention is the suggestion made by Volodin in May 2012 that the composition of the Council be decided by online elections. Although this suggestion appears to dovetail well with the e-governance and direct democracy championed by Putin in his presidential campaign, a number of council members have expressed concerns that this is a thinly veiled attempt to 'filter out' Kremlin critics. Although originally created by Putin in 2001, this Council has not always seen eye to eye with the President and so it is little wonder that thirteen of the 38-strong council have resigned since May, many citing their unwillingness to work with the returning president.

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Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of this recent clampdown is that it provides little obvious advantage for the authorities, who neither lack the means, legal or otherwise, to stifle opposition and civil society. The message that the authorities are sending is one of panic as 'raw laws' are rushed through parliament — laws which are likely to require amendments in the near future. The law on demonstrations is a case in point. Despite the fact that a political activist from the 'Other Russia' movement was fined 20 000 roubles in June, allegedly for carrying a banner with the inscription 'Russia without Putin', there are serious questions surrounding the ability of the authorities to apply this law to larger events as well as its compatibility with the Russian Constitution and the right to assemble.

This begs the question of why these laws are being hurried through the State Duma when all signs indicate that the protest movement is slowing, as politics makes way for summer vacations. Aside from Putin wanting to lay down an early marker, these reforms indicate that the authorities are readying for a more serious round of protests in the autumn and beyond. The source of this future instability may not necessarily come from those same demonstrators who participated in the post-election protests, but from a public growing uneasy at price rises and increasing economic difficulties. Interestingly, the summer rush to strengthen anti-opposition legislation has coincided with July price rises for Housing and Communal Services — an unpopular measure that was deliberately delayed until after the presidential election.

On a final note, it is by no means inconceivable that the very laws designed to strengthen the position of the authorities may actually have the opposite effect. The last time the Kremlin seriously considered similarly harsh anti-protest legislation was in 2003/2004. Then, it was widely rumoured that the Kremlin was about to ban protesting outside government buildings, although this idea was subsequently shelved following strong criticism from elements of the media and a negative public reaction. At the time, society was considered unready for stricter laws limiting the right to protest. Based on events over the past six months, it seems that society is still not ready, and it may be a dangerous move by the Kremlin to close off the remaining few avenues available to the public to express their dissatisfaction with the regime.