



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

E-NOTES

September 2012

PUTIN BETS ON REPRESSION

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In his first four months in office, Putin has done little about Russia's social and economic problems but he has made it clear that he intends to rely on repression to deal with growing opposition.

The most famous case is that of the Pussy Riot punk rock band whose members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Maria Alyokhina, were sentenced to two years in prison for performing a song in the Christ the Savior Cathedral asking for the help of the Virgin in removing Putin. The case attracted worldwide attention because of the use of a prison sentence to punish a nonviolent political protest.

The fate of the women, however, was not an isolated incident. A series of repressive measures and the intensified persecution of opposition figures show that Putin has made a decision to rely on forcible measures. As a result, the political crisis in Russia is likely to worsen because repression may succeed only in energizing the opposition.

In the face of the largest demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Union, Putin has introduced a number of measures intended to impose limits on the opposition. First of all, he changed the law on meetings to include huge fines for participating in unsanctioned rallies. The top fine was raised 150 times to 300,000 rubles (\$9,200). The average Russian makes 24,000 rubles (\$740).

There is also a new law on nongovernmental organizations. According to the law, NGOs that receive foreign grants must now register as foreign agents. Inspections of these groups will increase threefold and any failure to register will be punished by fines of up to 1 million rubles (\$32,200) and up to four years in prison. Among the affected groups are the Memorial society, which commemorates the victims of repression, the anti-corruption agency, Transparency International, and the Moscow Helsinki group.

Finally, the law on slander has been changed to re qualify slander as a criminal offense punishable by a fine of up to 5 million rubles (\$157,000). The experience of Pussy Riot is a strong indication that it will be interpreted in the interests of the authorities against independent journalists and politicians.

The adoption of repressive measures has been accompanied by the persecution of Putin's political opponents.

On July 31, Alexei Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger who is one Putin's most popular political opponents, was summoned to the Investigative Committee in Moscow and indicted for "organizing the misappropriation" of \$500,000 from a state owned timber firm, Kirovles. The charge carries a 10 year prison sentence. In May, 2011, Navalny was accused by prosecutors of causing financial damage to Kirovles of only \$50,000 by persuading the

company to take part in a disadvantageous business deal. There was no accusation at that time that he had stolen anything. The new charges appear to be a case of direct political retaliation. They were leveled a week after Navalny published a series of documents on his blog suggesting that Alexander Bastrykin, the head of the investigative Committee and close Putin ally, had concealed from Russian officials that he owns property in the Czech republic and had acquired the right to live there.

At the same time, a court in Smolensk has sentenced Taisia Osipova, the wife of Sergei Fomchenkov, an activist with the Other Russia opposition movement to eight years in prison on drug related charges. The sentence came even though the prosecution had asked the court to give her to a sentence of only four years. Osipova, 28, has a five year old daughter and has been diagnosed with diabetes. She said that drugs found in her apartment were planted there and this was confirmed by an eyewitness who later passed a lie detector test. It is very rare in Russia for a judge to impose a sentence that is stiffer than that requested by the prosecutor. Supporters of Osipova argue that she is being persecuted in retaliation for her husband's political activities and her refusal to testify against him.

The regime is also seeking to silence one of the few dissenting deputies in parliament. On September 14, the Duma voted to expel Gennady Gudkov, one of three members of parliament who are participating in the protest movement. The other two are Gudkov's son, Dmitri, and Ilya Ponomaryev. The Duma is acted against Gudkov ostensibly because he ran a business while serving in parliament. Russia's anti-corruption laws require persons joining any branch of government to divest themselves of business interests but Duma deputies usually skirt this requirement by transferring ownership of their businesses to their wives or other family members while continuing to run them. This was done by Gudkov and is regarded as standard practice in the Duma. Only Gudkov, however, has been singled out for prosecution. The action against him represents the first time in its history that the Duma has attempted to expel one of its members on these grounds. At the same time, a representative of the Investigative Committee said that a decision will be made on whether to file criminal charges against Gudkov in the near future.

The steps taken by Putin are being reinforced by ideological support from the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Kirill has asked Russians to stay away from anti-government protest rallies. He has described Putin's years of power as "a miracle of God."

The Church supported the prosecution of Pussy Riot and of Maxim Yefimov, a blogger in the northwestern republic of Karelia who was tried in April on charges of inspiring religious hatred, the same charges as those faced by Pussy Riot. In his blog, Yefimov blamed the church for corruption and the control of society by the security services in Russia. He called Orthodox priests, "dressed up beardies" and accused them of building churches with public funds. Yefimov fled to Estonia in May after investigators asked that he be placed in a hospital for psychiatric examination.

Vsevolod Chaplin, an archpriest and influential figure in the church establishment, has called for an end to official secularism. He stated that the goal of the church should be the "the unity of the church and the authorities." Chaplin this week suggested increasing the ability of law enforcement to crack down on anticlerical behavior and a law criminalizing "blasphemy" is now being considered in the State Duma.

All of these measures, however, are unlikely to stem the wave of protests. On the contrary, they are likely to contribute to it by stoking the aggressiveness of Putin's supporters while, at the same time, convincing Russians who have been hesitant about which side to support that the regime is not capable of reform.

Russians who are adept at reading tea leaves, see the introduction of these measures as a possible foretaste of far more brutal methods in the near future. Lilya Shevtsova, an analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Center, writing in *The Moscow Times*, said, August 28, that, "the Kremlin's turn toward the use of force proves that the regime can't be changed peacefully." This leaves only revolution as the possibility for change and, in Russia, revolutions have a very tragic history.

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