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By Fred Weir

Russia's opposition feels bite of a chill wind from Ukraine (+video)

Alarmed by events in Ukraine, Russia's parliament is drafting laws that will let police come down harder and faster on any activities or speech they deem defiant.

Події на Україні ускладнюють становище російської опозиції

Стривожений подіями на Україні, російський парламент приступив до складання законів, що дозволяють поліції оперативніше і жорсткіше реагувати на будь-яку діяльність і виступи, які вона вважає викликаючими.

За останні два роки прихильники жорсткої лінії в Думі прийняли цілий ряд законів, які посилюють покарання за протести і звужують можливості законного інакомислення.

Нові проекти законів передбачають суворіші покарання за непокору співробітникам поліції і за участь у несанкціонованих вуличних протестах, вимога до громадян Росії повідомляти про своє подвійне громадянство за наявності у них такого, а також тюремні терміни для тих, хто «вивчає» те, що може бути витлумачено як підготовка «масових заворушень».

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0409/Russia-s-opposition-feels-bite-of-a-chill-wind-from-Ukraine-video>

Moscow

Life has not been easy for critics of the Kremlin and members of Russia's opposition in recent years. But it's set to get even harder.

Citing events in Ukraine as an example of what happens when "foreign-funded extremists" are allowed to take advantage of democratic institutions, conservatives in the Kremlin and Russian parliament are preparing a new crackdown on nongovernmental organizations, independent media, and opposition political groups.

Over the past two years, hardliners in the Duma have passed a raft of laws that toughen penalties for protest and narrow the window for legal dissent. But a new wave of measures is under preparation. The new draft laws include tougher punishments for disobeying a police officer or participating in an unauthorized street protest; a requirement for Russians to disclose any dual citizenship they may hold; and prison sentences for anyone who "studies" anything that might be interpreted as planning for "mass disorders."

Legal experts say that, like other recent laws that redefine "treason" and require foreign-funded NGOs that engage in anything that might be construed as political activity to

register as "foreign agents," the new bills are so vaguely worded that they might be employed against almost anyone at the discretion of authorities.

Ilya Ponomaryov, the sole deputy in the 450-seat Duma to vote against the annexation of Crimea last month, says that it's not just about the harsher legislation coming down the pike, but a change in political atmosphere that will make police come down harder and faster on any activities or speech they deem defiant.

"[President Vladimir] Putin now has a strong excuse to crack down, and a majority of the population supporting him. He has managed to convert the situation into something like a military emergency, a matter of basic patriotism, in which protest is not viewed as mere dissent but now looks like treason," he says.

New laws are being rushed into place, and older ones applied more vigorously, because "Putin thinks of these Ukrainian events as a personal threat," Mr. Ponomaryov says. "Of course he's nervous. He knows the West supported those protesters in Kiev and would back the Russian opposition in similar circumstances, too. He has a conspiratorial mindset, though he is not completely unrealistic. In the Duma, however, deputies are more prone to see things in black and white. It's easy for them to roll out these new laws, because that's just the way they think."

Defending state dogma

In recent weeks, a two-year-old law ostensibly meant to crack down on child pornography has suddenly been used to blacklist political websites, just as critics warned might happen at the time. Among those shut down have been the websites of anticorruption activist Alexei Navalny, chess champion cum opposition leader Gary Kasparov, and the online opposition-leaning newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

The more mainstream online news service Lenta.ru saw its editor fired and a full makeover of its website after publishing an interview with a "Ukrainian nationalist." The liberal Internet TV station Dozhd is struggling to survive in cyberspace after being dropped by all of Russia's major cable providers.

"We see a qualitative change taking place" since the Ukrainian crisis erupted, says Sergei Davidis, a human rights lawyer and member of the opposition Solidarnost. "Things that were 'unthinkable' not so long ago are suddenly becoming 'thinkable,'" he says.

Ironically, a new law due to come into effect next month will make it illegal to question Russia's "territorial integrity." That means, Mr. Davidis points out, "that any citizen of Crimea who has second thoughts about voting to join Russia will now face a prison term."

Another piece of draft legislation would make it illegal to try to "rehabilitate Nazism" in public speech or writings. The bill was inspired by an online poll run by TV Dozhd that asked viewers whether it might have been better to surrender the city of Leningrad to the Germans in World War II to save its citizens the ravages of the 900-day siege. The poll triggered public outrage, and the station quickly withdrew it and apologized. But many experts argue that the new law, which appears on the surface to be aimed at ultra-rightists, will actually be used against anyone who raises thought-provoking questions about the past or challenges official historical dogma – especially concerning World War II.

"We do have neo-Nazis in Russia – as everywhere – but they tend to be ultra-patriotic and police take a very lenient view toward them," says Ponomaryov.

"It would actually not be a bad thing if police were to crack down on them, but no one thinks that is the purpose of this draft law. It is aimed at freedom of thought, the right to question. And, like all these laws, it will be interpreted by the courts," which are controlled by the authorities, he adds. "It's a dangerous thing."

'Screws tightened to the fullest extent'

The most vulnerable groups in Russia are NGOs that receive some degree of foreign funding and engage in activities that bring them into friction with authorities. Quite a few human rights, cultural, LGBT, and environmental groups have already been ordered by courts to declare themselves "foreign agents" – a term that connotes "spy" in Russian. So was Russia's only independent public polling agency, the Levada Center.

On Monday, Mr. Putin told his security chiefs that foreign-funded NGOs in Ukraine were the conduit through which Western intelligence agencies orchestrated the Ukrainian revolt, and that must never be allowed to happen in Russia.

"We will not accept a situation like what happened in Ukraine, when in many cases it was through nongovernmental organizations that the nationalist and neo-Nazi groups and militants, who became the shock troops in the anti-constitutional coup d'état, received funding from abroad," Putin said.

The next day, Russia's Constitutional Court turned down a challenge against the law requiring certain NGOs to register as "foreign agents."

"Putin spoke, and the court ruled. This is the worst decision in the history of the court, and a clear sign that the screws are going to be tightened to the fullest extent," says Oleg Orlov, chairman of Memorial, Russia's largest grassroots human rights movement.

Everyone is vulnerable now, says Ponomarev. "They are creating instruments for manual application in particular cases. If anybody becomes 'dangerous' from the authorities' viewpoint, there will always be an appropriate tool to remove him with."