

Russian government cracks down on opposition

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Since reoccupying the office of the presidency on May 7, Vladimir Putin has initiated a crackdown on political opposition as his government prepares to implement a right-wing agenda.

In a shift from the pre-election period, the Russian state has responded to anti-Kremlin demonstrations in recent weeks with brute force. A May 6 protest of 20,000 people on the eve of Putin's inauguration ended with violent clashes between security forces and the crowds, with upwards of 400 people arrested.

Subsequent smaller-scale rallies have also been met with repression, including the clearing of Occupy-style camps at locations in Moscow. Opposition leaders, including the right-wing nationalist Alexei Navalny and the leftist Sergei Udaltsov, have been detained and made to serve 15-day jail sentences.

A bill has been introduced in the Duma, Russia's parliament, that would dramatically increase fines for those participating in illegal demonstrations, with penalties rising to \$9,600 (or even as much as \$29,000) from their current level of \$160. If the law is passed, organizers of such events could face fines of \$48,000, up from \$1,160. Earlier this week, Putin signaled his support for the measure, noting that similar sanctions exist in Western countries and stating, "We must shield people from radical actions."

In a further sign of what is in store, the architect of the recent state violence in Moscow, Chief of Police Vladimir Kolokoltsev, was appointed minister of the interior in the newly formed government. Putin also named Igor Kholmanskikh, a tank factory foreman from the Urals, as a regional representative for the Kremlin. During the recent wave of anti-government protests, Kholmanskikh

offered on national television to rally his "boys" to come to Moscow to "defend stability" if the police couldn't "handle it."

In other areas as well the Kremlin has pointedly rebuffed the opposition in the formation of the new government, with most cabinet positions given to holdovers from the previous administration. Sergei Lavrov, who has opposed US policy toward Syria and Iran, will remain foreign minister. Igor Shuvalov, a close Putin confidant, and Vladislav Surkov, the architect of the Kremlin's political system, who once famously declared that Putin was "a godsend," will become vice premiers. Certain figures unpopular with the broader public, namely the minister of education and the minister of health and social development, were shifted into advisory positions in an effort to give the illusion of change.

The Kremlin's repressive measures are, in an immediate sense, directed against the opposition, which encompasses an array of political tendencies, all of which either embrace a right-wing agenda or seek to channel social anger behind limited, democratic demands.

This opposition openly courts Washington. Its protests continue to draw from a relatively narrow social base—middle-class layers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, liberal journalists, writers, artists and established figures within the political and economic elite.

In carrying out the crackdown on the opposition, however, the Kremlin is preparing for a looming confrontation with the working class. Putin secured his election victory because of the inability of the opposition to win support within the working class, and by making a series of election promises about alleviating the social crisis in Russia. He has no intention of keeping these

campaign pledges.

Despite projected growth rates of 3.4 percent to 4.0 percent for the current year, the Russian economy faces mounting pressures. Prior to the election, for instance, international ratings agencies estimated that oil prices would have to reach \$117 to \$120 a barrel in order for Putin to fulfill \$160 billion worth of campaign promises and maintain a balanced budget. Currently, oil is trading at well below this price and even below the \$100 per barrel estimated by the Russian government as necessary to maintain fiscal health. Furthermore, the country's economy is highly dependent on energy exports to the European Union, which are expected to undergo a sharp decline as the region's economic crisis deepens.

The real character of what is in store for the Russian masses was made clear this week when the newly appointed education minister, Dmitri Livanov, announced plans to slash by 50 percent the number of state-financed positions available for students at institutions of higher education. The effect of this measure, which has provoked widespread outrage, will be to make a university education accessible only to the privileged.

In a May 24 commentary published in *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, Dmitri Babitch, a political analyst with Voice of Russia, observed that Livanov's position was entirely in keeping with the positions of the liberals and private enterprise. Babitch wrote, "Business has long been complaining about Russian education being too detached from real life and too 'encyclopedic,' requiring too much taxpayers' money for something business has no use for—teaching young people good taste in art, for example."

The new minister of health and social development, Maksim Topilin, announced that the government is exploring the possibility of shifting to a contribution-defined, as opposed to a benefit-defined, pension system. He suggested that a portion of the mandatory payments made by employers into the pension fund be transformed into voluntary contributions by employees. In defense of this proposal, which will invariably result in the slashing of payments to pensioners, Topilin observed that contribution-defined plans are what predominate in much of the world.

Just a few days after the presidential election, the

government also scrapped plans to introduce a tax on luxury goods.

At the same time, Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have indicated they are moving forward with plans to privatize a number of state assets, albeit at a slower pace than was planned during Medvedev's presidency and is now demanded by the liberal opposition. The full-scale privatization of joint-stock companies in aviation and shipbuilding, as well as the state corporation Rostekhnologiya, will result in layoffs and wage cuts for employees. While these companies are already semi-privately managed and largely privately owned, their sale on the market and removal from bankruptcy protections will result in a further boondoggle for the super-rich in Russia.

Putin has called for a 50 percent increase in the country's labor productivity by the year 2018, a transformation that can be achieved only through the axing of jobs, speed-up, and wage-cutting. Making the Russian economy more competitive, a key goal of the Putin-Medvedev regime and a part of the move towards World Trade Organization ascension this year, will be carried out at the expense of the working class.

Even as the government prepares to implement its right-wing agenda, it is conscious of the deep hostility felt by ordinary people towards its policies. A recent study by the Center for Strategic Studies, a liberal think-tank in Moscow, found that the number of committed Putin supporters has fallen below 50 percent.

In a May 24 article reporting the study's results, the *Wall Street Journal* observed that researchers found "the pro-democracy agenda of the Moscow demonstrators doesn't find broad support in the rest of the country." The article continued: "There, demands are more pragmatic, focused on better government services such as health care, education, law enforcement and infrastructure. But the government has for years failed to deliver on promises of improvement in these areas."



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