

If you can't suppress them, squeeze them
By: The Economist
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BEFORE the Russian Duma broke for its annual summer holiday on July 13th, it had an important agenda to get through. In a flurry of hurried voting, the country's parliament passed a series of laws—on NGOs, defamation, and the internet—meant to stiffen spines inside the regime and scare off and splinter those who are most actively opposed to it.

Despite signs of resistance from parties once deemed loyal to the Kremlin, the Duma is still under the control of the firmly pro-Kremlin United Russia party. As such, it remains a dependable instrument for Vladimir Putin, the president, in his struggle with the country's opposition movement. At the moment, the Kremlin is not considering using force: calling in the troops would be ugly and risky as well as counterproductive. And with Mr Putin loth to see Russia become a Belarus-style pariah overnight, the Kremlin decided that, "If you can't suppress them, squeeze them," says Boris Makarenko of Centre for Political Technologies, a think-tank.

The legislative offensive began last month, with a law raising fines on those who attend unsanctioned demonstrations to as much as 300,000 roubles, or \$9,300. Then came last week's three new bills. The first would force NGOs that receive funding from abroad to submit to more rigorous financial checks and publicly declare themselves to be "foreign agents", a term designed to discredit their work; the second would recriminalise libel, an offence taken out of the criminal code just last year, now with fines as high as 5m roubles; the third would create a "blacklist" of websites to be blocked, ostensibly so as to protect children from illegal or harmful content, but relying on technology that could be used against any online material the state decides to ban.

Legislators wrote the bills in a rush. The wording of the law on NGOs had to be quickly edited between the first and second reading when it became clear that two allies of the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church, which receives donations from abroad, and the state-managed RT television channel, which gets money from foreign advertisers, would fall into the category of "foreign agents".

Whether due to haste or design, the new laws are marked by vagueness, leaving courts and officials all down the country's bureaucratic chain great latitude in enforcing them. Mass prosecutions under the new laws are unlikely, although local and regional officials are likely to use them to go after local opponents and rivals. Above all, the laws are not meant to be regularly enforced as much as used to put those in opposition in a state of continuous theoretical legal jeopardy.

The law on the internet may have the farthest-reaching implications. It calls for a new government body to administer a list of websites with banned content; the membership of this new committee, and how it will select the sites to be blocked, remain unclear.

What most worries Russian internet analysts is that although the text of the law focuses on websites related to child pornography, illegal drugs and suicide, it also contains a provision for any type of illegal online material to be blocked by court order. The opacity of the language leaves the law open to manipulation on political grounds. Moreover, the blocking of both individual websites and internet protocol addresses may require service providers to acquire "deep-packet inspection" technology, which filters internet traffic into separate streams, making it easier to block particular services, such as Skype, or pages, such as a certain Facebook group.

In what has become a habit, Duma deputies point abroad to justify the new laws and procedures, comparing them to America's Foreign Agents Registration Act. The initiator of the NGO bill, Alexander Sidyakin, has said there is "nothing insulting" in the term "foreign agent". Meanwhile one of the authors of the internet bill, Elena Mizulina, insists the legislation is meant only to protect children and families, and cannot be abused for political purposes.

What ultimately lies behind the Duma's new laws is a mixture of nervousness about a political environment that is wholly unfamiliar, and a belief in the tough methods of Mr Putin's previous stints as president. It is not certain they will be as effective as in the past. Over the past decade, Mr Putin has proved adept at manipulating the official political system—the world of parties and elections—but he and his advisers have yet to prove their skill in the less-manageable realm of civil society. Recent polls from the Levada Centre, a research organisation, suggest that although support for Mr Putin remains high, much of that support (40-45%) is passive or conditional.

In a widely read Vedomosti column this week Kirill Rogov, a journalist, wrote that Mr Putin has returned to the Kremlin a weakened political actor, but that he is "intent on ruling as if his mandate was as strong as before." According to Mr Rogov, the president wants to show that "You won't get anything from him." That may be true enough, at least for now—but the danger for Mr Putin is that by giving nothing today, he may be forced to give up much more tomorrow.

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