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Online Extremism in Russia: Assessing Putin's Move

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

In a calculated move, President Vladimir Putin intervened to lessen the impact of an anti-extremism piece of legislation. He is not getting soft against extremism. The main consideration is his ability to stay popular and remain in power.

Commentary

THE RUSSIAN State Duma approved on 15 November 2018, the first reading of amendments to a controversial anti-extremism law. President Putin had personally proposed amendments to the law (Article 282 of the Criminal Code), underlying the significance to him of this domestic political issue.

The proposed amendments will decriminalise first-time extremism offences. When in effect, only those who already faced administrative repercussions (non-imprisonment punitive measures) over the past year will be criminally liable. It introduces administrative liability for extremist speech. First-time offenders will face fines up to 20,000 roubles (US\$300), up to 100 hours of community work, or an administrative arrest for 15 days. Organisations, however, will face much bigger fines – up to 500,000 roubles (about US\$7,500).

Perceived Abuse of Law

The Carnegie Moscow Centre published in October 2018 an article by Lincoln Pigman of the University of Oxford on Article 282 and its domestic political implications. Pigman claims that the *siloviki*, or representatives of the security organs, are waging a war on Internet users they consider “extremists”.

He adds that the crackdown dates back to 2014, when Article 282 was amended,

enabling the prosecution of Internet users who “incite hatred against individuals or groups on the basis of gender, race, nationality, language, origin, religion, or membership in a social group”.

Pigman further argues that this law has been abused by the *siloviki* to rein in the perceived growth of anti-Putin sentiment in the country, including youth and that “the law’s most egregious abuses have occurred in places far from Moscow, such as Barnaul, a city that has been dubbed Russia’s ‘extremism capital’ because of the proliferation of online extremism cases there”.

According to Pigman, opinion polls show that “by a margin of 43 to 36 percent, Russians now consider the majority of online extremism cases to be unfounded. Many feel that the law must be either amended or repealed”.

Factors Behind Putin’s Intervention

His intervention in the matter illustrates his political pragmatism and willingness to confront the *siloviki*, despite the fact that they have been and remains the backbone of his support structure, and their perceived attempt to use this law to further suppress political dissent and strengthen his hold on power.

After the recent introduction of unpopular pension reform which raised the retirement age, President Putin must be concerned about his standing in the eyes of his people. According to Chris Weafer, a long-standing observer of Russia’s economy, Putin’s “approval rating was 66% in October, down from 67% in September, and the lowest level this year. It is also the lowest level of approval since the Crimea referendum”.

This point must be kept in mind – his popularity has been consistently high but various factors have led to a downward trend, major ones being the abovementioned unpopular pension reform and the state of the economy. President Putin is obviously not going to allow the controversy over Article 282 to further add fuel to fire. It is also a manifestation of his practical approach in trying to resolve a domestic political matter and his recognition of the challenges posed to his power by the Internet.

Second, recent electoral losses of Kremlin-backed gubernatorial candidates in four regions are another factor he has had to deal with. In the past, candidates who enjoyed the Kremlin’s support would normally course through the electoral process without much ado.

Recent Lone-wolf Attacks

Third, two violent incidents must also have played a role in President Putin’s decision to intervene.

On 17 October 2018, Russia was stunned by a deadly attack by college student in Kerch, in the Crimea, on his fellow students; in the process, 21 lay dead with 70 suffering injuries from the student’s use of a shotgun and improvised explosive device he legally owned.

Significantly, President Putin was quoted by a BBC News report dated 18 October

2018 as saying that the tragedy “appears to be a result of globalisation”; he added that “on social media, on the internet, we see the creation of entire communities. Everything started with the tragic events in schools in the US”. As a consequence, he called for tougher gun control legislation, another display of his realism.

The second incident took place on 31 October 2018, when a teen ignited a bomb in the FSB (Federal Security Service) office in Arkhangelsk in Russia’s northwest; he died in the attack which also injured some FSB personnel. The attackers in the Kerch and Arkhangelsk incidents were not linked to any terrorist organisations. The first attack was labelled a mass murder while the second was described as a terrorist act.

Both men were in their teens and ethnic Slavs; terrorism in Russia in the public mind has thus far been unfortunately associated more with the non-Slavic population from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Securing Position as Primus Inter Pares?

Finally, President Putin must have also taken into account media reports that stated that the Kerch attacker had made social media posts suggesting he was inspired by the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School outside Denver, in the United States. In the case of the Arkhangelsk incident, according to Stratfor, the geopolitical global intelligence platform, a message posted seven minutes before the attack to a Russian anarchist community on the social media messaging app, Telegram, claimed responsibility for the bombing.

President Putin must be aware that the Internet and social media space cannot be totally controlled and hence, one would be more politically prudent to show some restraint in reacting to its perceived excesses.

By decriminalising this law, President Putin seeks to remove the sting from an issue which has the potential to become a larger political hot potato and might have a destabilising effect on his popularity. He has shown his mastery of the situation and political savoir-faire to his voters as well as critics and his *siloviki* supporters.

To his voters and especially his critics, he has signalled political magnanimity while to the *siloviki*, he has confirmed once again that he is primus inter pares in the system. If anything, his intervention only serves to strengthen, not weaken his overall political standing.

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