

Putin Loosens Ban on Protests at Winter Olympics

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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President Vladimir Putin has eased his sweeping ban on public protests around the time of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in a move that will let demonstrations go ahead if they are approved by the police.

The amendments will cover the same period as the original ban — starting on Tuesday, a month ahead of the Olympics, and running until March 21, five days after the Paralympics end.

However, it remains unclear whether the decree, published on the Kremlin's website on Saturday, will provide for much additional freedom on the ground in Sochi.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Saturday that the regional administration and Games organizers would designate a special area for protest rallies in Sochi — in an indication that demonstrators might be allowed to gather in only one place.

International Olympic Committee chief Thomas Bach said last month that the Russian authorities would set up public protest zones in Sochi during the Winter Olympics.

Peskov's comments have cast doubt on whether the decree would go beyond that.

The August ban prohibited all demonstrations not connected with the Games. The measure appeared to be aimed at blocking protests against Russia's "gay propaganda" law and drew strong criticism from human rights activists.

The amendments to the protest bill could represent the latest in a series of steps taken by the Kremlin to draw away international criticism, including an amnesty for several high-profile prisoners, such as the "Arctic 30" Greenpeace activists, and the pardoning of former tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

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