

Putin's Olympic PR Ploys

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President Vladimir Putin lifted a blanket ban on protests and rallies in Sochi earlier this month, thereby fulfilling his promise to the International Olympic Committee to relax the rules governing protests in the city.

The easing of the protest ban coupled with the release of dozens of high-profile prisoners last month — including former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot — has led to speculation in the Western media about whether these decisions were a sign of a political thaw in Russia, a result of diplomatic behind-the-scenes maneuverings or just a public relations stunt to stave off criticism of the human rights situation in the country on the eve of the Olympics.

A closer look suggests that it is likely only a PR stunt. Putin's cosmetic steps do not diminish the erosion of civil liberties and political rights in Russia over the past two years — particularly the intimidation of the political opposition and human rights defenders, including LGBT activists.

According to the anti-protest decree signed by Putin last August, any protest not directly related to the Olympic Games and planned for the period from Jan. 7 until March 21 was to be conducted "in a different time period." The amended decree allows protests during the games but only in a specially designated area — 14 kilometers from the closest Olympic site, and this will be contingent upon approval from the local administration and the Federal Security Service.

This new concession may come as a surprise, considering recent terrorist attacks in Volgograd. But whether any meetings or rallies will actually be allowed to take place remains to be seen. As of Jan. 7, a special security regime was imposed in the city to prevent terrorist attacks, leading to the presence of tens of thousands of police officers and internal troops, as well as restrictions on the freedom of movement for residents in personal vehicles.

With that in mind, the partial lift of the ban on protests in Sochi does not mean that the right to freedom of assembly in Russia has been bolstered, especially considering the new law on protests adopted in June 2012 imposing hefty fines on participants and organizers of unsanctioned gatherings.

Likewise, the amnesty of four of Moscow's Bolotnaya Square prisoners, two Pussy Riot members and the Khodorkovsky pardon does not mean that there are no more political prisoners in Russia. In fact, there are at least seven more: the remaining suspects accused of involvement in skirmishes with the police during the Bolotnaya Square protest in May 2012. They are still behind bars awaiting the conclusion of their ongoing trials. One has been unjustly sentenced to forcible treatment in a closed psychiatric asylum. As for the amnestied prisoners, the two criminal cases against Khodorkovsky are still open.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the international attention surrounding human rights violations and related pressure from abroad does matter to Russia. The government does care about global opinion. In light of several recent public relations victories on the global arena — such as giving temporary asylum to former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, brokering a deal on chemical weapons in Syria and pulling Ukraine back into Russia's sphere of influence — Putin would like to use the Olympics to project a positive image of Russia abroad.

The refusal by the U.S. and French presidents and the German chancellor to attend the Games may have spooked Putin, pushing him to take somewhat friendly measures to prevent other world leaders from following their lead. Perhaps that is why he complied with the International Olympic Committee's request to ease the ban on protests in Sochi and provided assurances to athletes and visitors that there will be no discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Despite the seeming thaw, political leaders and human rights advocates should not become complacent with these few concessions. They should continue to draw attention to the many individuals still unjustly languishing in Russian prisons. We should continue to highlight the many cases of the Kremlin's abuse of power and emphasize the importance of upholding human rights. Our efforts should be ongoing, continuing long after the Olympic Games.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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