

Russia: Harsher legislation on public gatherings

Katarzyna Chawryło

On 9 June, restrictive new amendments to the laws on administrative offences and public gatherings came into effect in Russia. The State Duma promptly adopted these amendments at the second and third readings on 5 June, and President Vladimir Putin signed the document three days later. The new amendments introduce high fines for participants in illegal assemblies and for those who cause property damage or personal injury during prohibited actions: up to 300,000 roubles (US\$9200) for individuals, up to 600,000 roubles (US\$18,400) for state representatives, and up to 1 million roubles (US\$30,700) for legal persons. Previously the penalties had been much lower, not exceeding 2000 roubles (US\$60). In addition, a penalty of up to 200 hours of compulsory community service has been introduced for offenders who during protests impede the movement of pedestrians and vehicles, or contribute to the causing of injury. Furthermore, participants in protest actions will not have the right to cover their faces. The government can now not only hold the direct perpetrators of offences during gatherings responsible for their offences, but also the organisers – both the official organisers and any persons involved in the organisation, even if they are not directly acting as organisers. In accordance with the approved amendments, no person who has been given an administrative punishment for organising protests on two or more occasions will be given permission to organise any further demonstrations. This regulation prevents leading opposition activists such as Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin and Sergei Udaltsov from acting as organisers of mass actions.

Commentary

- The new law is the government's response to the continuing anti-regime protests in Russia, which in addition to traditional rallies have taken the form of walking around town or occupying public squares. The changes to the law are part of the government's current tactics, which are based on consistently intensifying action against the opposition, as well as suppressing spontaneous social activity by more radical methods and the use of intimidation.
- The speed at which the Duma adopted the amendments is noteworthy. The government made every effort to ensure that the regulations were in force by the time of the 'March of Millions' scheduled by the opposition for 12 June in Moscow (which was Russia Day, a national holiday), so that the participants and organisers would be covered by the new law if they committed any offences. The government probably assumed that the harsh penalties would discourage ordinary citizens from going into the street, and would ensure

that it would be the more radical activists, ready to continue their protests even in violation of the law, who took part in the protests. The radicalisation of the opposition's action would be an excuse for the authorities to use violent methods and further discredit the protesters, as well as a confirmation of the need to strengthen the legal penalties.

- The 'March of Millions' on 12 June in Moscow was uneventful, and no disturbances were reported. According to various sources, the participants numbered between 22,000 (according to the Interior Ministry) and 50,000 (according to the protest's organisers). However, several opposition leaders did not participate, as – even though it was a national holiday – investigators had called them in that day for questioning regarding the clashes which took place during a rally on 6 May. On 11 June, several of the protest's organisers (including Navalny, Yashin and Kseniya Sobchak) had their homes searched. The peaceful character of the march, the good discipline of the participants and the relatively high turnout indicate that the government failed to intimidate and disperse the opposition supporters. Another opposition protest has been called for October.