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Russia considers new powers for KGB successor

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Russia's parliament is considering a government-drafted bill that would increase the power of the security services and restore practices once associated with their Soviet predecessor, the KGB.

The legislation would allow Federal Security Service officers to summon individuals for informal talks and issue written warnings about "inadmissible" participation in anti-government activities such as protest rallies. It also appeared aimed at tightening controls on journalists.

It was unclear when the bill would come up for a vote, and in the meantime it could be amended or even scuttled. But in its current form the legislation continues a trend under Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, who has allowed the security services to steadily regain power and influence at the expense of Russia's nascent democracy.

Since coming to power in 2000, Putin, now prime minister, has created an obedient parliament, abolished direct gubernatorial elections, presided over the reining in of non-state national television and cracked down on political dissent.

Like many of the past restrictions, the proposed new measures were described as part of an effort to combat extremism.

An explanatory note said some news organizations "propagate the cult of individualism, violence and mistrust in the government's capacity to protect its citizens, virtually drawing the youth to extremism."

Journalists who refuse to follow the demands of security officers or prevent them from fulfilling their duties could face charges under the legislation.

The bill, submitted Saturday, followed the twin subway bombings last month that killed 40 people. One of the bombers hit the Lubyanka subway station, beneath the headquarters of the security service.

The speaker of parliament's lower house, Boris Gryzlov, had sharply criticized two major Russian newspapers for their coverage, implying they had taken the side of the terrorists by noting that the attacks may have been motivated by the Kremlin's harsh policy in the North Caucasus.

Human rights advocates and opposition leaders said the new measures could be used to violate the rights of government critics and further curtail media independence.

"I am shocked by how brazen they are," said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the 82-year-old head of the Moscow Helsinki Group. "It's not even like Soviet times, when they (KGB officers) were under Communist Party control."

An opposition leader who has faced intimidation and pranks by pro-Kremlin youth groups said the law would only legitimize FSB officers' abusive treatment of Kremlin critics and ordinary Russians.

"The FSB has had these rights without these laws," said Ilya Yashin, who leads the youth movement of the liberal party Yabloko. "The situation is sickening, the public has no way of controlling them."

A Communist Party lawmaker said he was concerned about vague wording that would leave the legislation open to interpretation.

"The law is written in such a way that makes it hard to guess how it would work in practice," said Viktor Ilyukhin, a former prosecutor. "I have no doubts that it would open the way for arbitrary interpretations."

The Communist Party is the last remaining faction that occasionally opposes Kremlin-backed bills in the State Duma, the lower house.