

Russia: 'Foreign Agents' Bill Threatens Journalists

Amendment Would Extend Restrictions to Individuals, Including Bloggers

RSF, together with 9 human rights organisations, is concerned by a new bill before the Russian parliament that would expand the status of "foreign agents" to private persons, including bloggers and independent journalists. This legislative initiative will have a detrimental impact on the already restrictive environment for independent journalism in Russia, and must be dropped.

Russia's legislation on "foreign agents" already covers nongovernmental organizations and media outlets that receive any amount of funding from foreign sources. It requires them to indicate their 'foreign agent' status in publications, and creates onerous reporting requirements, and restrictions on the activities they may undertake.

Criminal and administrative sanctions for non-compliance include, inter alia, fines of up to 500,000 roubles or imprisonment of up to two years. In November 2017, human rights organizations criticized Russia for its adoption of legislation amendments that extended "foreign agent" regulations to media outlets.

The proposed expansion of the legislation would allow authorities to also label individuals as "foreign agents" if they disseminate information to an unspecified number of people and receive funding for this from abroad. This definition would cover bloggers and independent journalists who may receive grants, salaries, or payment for specific pieces of work from any foreign source.

Bloggers and independent journalists who fall under the law will be required to register with the Ministry of Justice, and those living abroad would also have to create and register under a legal entity inside Russia in order to publish in Russia. All information published by the 'foreign agent' blogger or journalist would then have to be marked with the "foreign agent" label. The proposed amendment passed the first reading in January 2018 and could become law by the end of 2019.

A proposed amendment to Russia's Code of Administrative Violations also stipulates that the media (and therefore bloggers) should be fined between 10,000 (\$155) and five million roubles (\$ 78,000) for non-compliance with "foreign agent" regulations.

These new amendments make the "foreign agents" legislation, which already violates international standards on freedom of expression and association, unjustifiably tough, said Galina Arapova, senior media lawyer at the Mass Media Defence Center in Russia.

"Journalists collaborating with foreign editorial offices will be the ones most affected by the law," she said. "If they receive remuneration through foreign bank transfers to Russian banks, then this will formally be a sufficient basis for recognition as a foreign agent, so there is no guarantee that the regulatory authorities will be able to determine 'foreign funded' work from their other journalism."

The requirement to register with the Ministry of Justice is also concerning, creating onerous requirements, particularly for Russian bloggers living abroad. In addition, the use of fines for the lack of labelling is likely to squeeze their reporting and blogs from the Russian Internet, as those on social networks will not repost for fear of sanctions.

Russia's move to label individuals as foreign agents is a further step to restrict free and independent media in the country. It will have a serious effect on international media cooperation with Russia, because any involvement with a foreign outlet will put journalists at risk of being labelled "foreign agents." It will also become a strong tool to silence opposition voices. Bloggers have an important role in informing public opinion in Russia and this is an attempt to control this inconvenient source of information.

We call on the Russian government to drop the proposed amendments and bring the existing legislation into line with Russia's obligations under international human rights law, including the right to freedom of expression (Article 10) and the right to freedom of assembly and association (Article 11) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The government should end its continued efforts to throttle online debate and silence independent journalism in the country.

Signed by

Amnesty International

ARTICLE 19

Civil Rights Defenders

Committee to Protect Journalists

Human Rights Watch

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

International Media Support

International Partnership for Human Rights

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)