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Bill Treats Political Parties Like a Company

By Natalya Krainova

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Registering political parties may soon become as easy as opening a firm, which is to say, hard but not impossible, according to draft legislation proposed by the Justice Ministry.

The amendments, cited by the media, propose registering all nongovernmental organizations, including parties and trade unions, under the same rules as commercial enterprises.

This could spell a breakthrough for the country's political system, in which no new party has been registered since 2008. The Justice Ministry, citing technicalities, has since shot down numerous registration requests by independent groups such as the liberal The Other Russia and Parnas, nationalist Rodina and leftist Rot Front.

Skeptics say, however, that registration would remain unobtainable for dissidents, while the amendments are just an attempt by the ministry to offload its responsibilities to other

agencies.

The bill was drafted on a 2010 government order to unify rules for the registration of commercial and noncommercial organizations, Kommersant reported Friday, citing a copy of the draft that it obtained.

The amendments propose to make registration of nonprofit organizations, including parties and trade unions, the sole job of the Federal Tax Service. At the moment, nonprofit groups have to register with both the tax agency and the Justice Ministry.

The bill also says the Federal Tax Service would not be able to check an organization's charter for legality. The rule is currently a main tool for the Justice Ministry to deny registration to political parties.

But the tax agency would still be able to deny registration to organizations if their logo or title violates the law. Also, the Prosecutor General's Office would still carry out checks of nonprofit groups after they are registered and would be able to close them down, said Gazeta.ru, which also cited the bill.

The Justice Ministry said in an e-mail Friday that the bill is pending approval by unspecified state agencies and that it would not comment on the draft in the meantime.

A spokesman for the Prosecutor General's Office confirmed by telephone that the ministry had submitted a copy of the bill to prosecutors to review, but refused to elaborate.

A spokesperson for the Federal Tax Service, meanwhile, said by e-mail Friday that the agency opposed the new responsibilities.

The current rules are better because they ensure the creation of organizations that pursue useful goals, while the changes would make it easier to register shady groups because it "doesn't envisage analysis of the paperwork" by nonprofit organizations, said the spokesperson, who asked for anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to the media.

Most legal experts and politicians cited by Kommersant and Gazeta.ru criticized the bill, saying the ministry should have instead drafted a clear set of rules on why a nonprofit group would or would not be registered.

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