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Screws to Tighten as NGO and Libel Bills Pass Duma

By Jennifer Rankin

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Correction appended

The State Duma put its stamp on two heavily criticized laws on the final day of its spring session Friday, capping a hectic period of lawmaking that opponents see as part of a crackdown on dissent.

Deputies voted overwhelmingly in favor of legislation that would brand some nongovernmental organizations as "foreign agents," and approved a hike in the maximum penalty for defamation to 5 million rubles ($152,888) from the previous limit of 3,000 rubles.

Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin ended the session by praising lawmakers for their work and saying he was proud to work in parliament. Then he announced the session closed, and a recording of the national anthem was played.

The NGO bill, approved in the 450-seat Duma with a 374-3 vote, requires groups that conduct political activity to register on a special government list for so-called "foreign agents."

Last-minute exemptions were secured for the Russian Orthodox Church, which receives foreign donations, as well as for organizations created or run by the state. This ensures that Russia Today, the TV channel created by the Kremlin that receives revenue from several American companies, will not be required to adopt the "foreign agent" label.

Upon the bill's passing, Russia's oldest human rights organization, the Moscow Helsinki Group, announced that it would cease taking foreign grants as soon as the law enters into force.

"The Moscow Helsinki Group was founded in 1976, but received its first [foreign] grant in 1993 when we were already a well-known, respected organization," Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the 84-year-old director, told Vedomosti.ru. "We worked without money then, we will work without money now."

Ilya Ponomaryov, a Duma deputy from the A Just Russia party, wrote on his blog that he could also be classified as a foreign agent because he had received donations from abroad to help victims of the recent floods in the Krasnodar region.

After the NGO bill passed, the Duma voted 238-91 to return defamation to the Criminal Code, reversing legislation passed last year at the initiative of former President Dmitry Medvedev that downgraded the offense to an administrative charge.

The law sets maximum penalties of 5 million rubles and 480 hours of community service. An earlier plan for jail sentences was dropped.

Twitter users responded to the bill Friday afternoon by spreading the hashtag "slander-while-you-gain" ("клевещи-пока-можно"), with bloggers firing potshots at Duma deputies and writing apparently sarcastic messages about the truthfulness of state television, the honesty of various politicians and the cleanliness of the Moscow River.

Journalists from Ekho Moskvy radio, Gazeta.ru and Kommersant, as well as members of the liberal Yabloko party, protested the bill outside the Duma entrance Friday morning.

The bills on NGOs and defamation are now scheduled to go to the Federation Council on Wednesday and, if passed by the senators as expected, must be signed by President Vladimir Putin and published in Rossiiskaya Gazeta before they become law.

The two laws cap a period of frenetic parliamentary activity that has seen the introduction of hefty fines for participants of unsanctioned demonstrations, as well as the creation of a blacklist of Internet sites.

This fall, another bill raising penalties for unlawful language could appear. Pavel Krasheninnikov, head of the Duma's Legislation Committee, said deputies would consider a bill in September that raises the fines for insults ten-fold, Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported.

In the Administrative Code, an insult is defined as "an abasement of the honor and dignity of another person, expressed in an unseemly manner," and is currently punishable by fines of

up to 5,000 rubles for individuals and 500,000 rubles for legal entities.

Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, said these bills should not be viewed as isolated policies. “They are part of a broader crackdown that unfolded at least since Putin's inauguration,” Lipman said by phone.

She said the legislation should be seen in the context of police raids of a dozen opposition figures' homes last month, charges against opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and a court decision to extend to November the pre-trial detention period of protesters accused of violence against police at a May 6 opposition rally.

“These developments are numerous and have unfolded at accelerating speed over the past months,” she said. “The government has shifted to a repressive mode, and once you fix on a repressive mode, there is no way to stop.”

Mikhail Fishman, a commentator, wrote in Friday's edition of Vedomosti that the flurry of legislation could be seen as a sign of the Kremlin's weakness rather than a sign of strength. “If everything is in order, then what's the rush?” he wrote.
Prominent blogger Anton Nossik suggested that the bills were drafted for the Kremlin, rather than in the Kremlin, as people tried to anticipate what the ruling elite wanted.

“The legislation that is being passed is not driven by the Kremlin. Different people are trying to guess the Kremlin's wishes,” he said by phone. “If [Putin] wanted someone in jail, he had the means. If he wanted a business shut down, it was shut down.”

For more details on the bill, see also:

United Russia Stands By NGO Bill

NGO Bill Questioned

NGOs Must Register as 'Foreign Agents'

Tajikistan Initiates Crackdown on Internet Critics

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the bill passed by the State Duma requiring certain NGOs to register as “foreign agents” included an exemption for state companies. In fact, that exemption also covered other organizations created or run by the state.

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