

United Russia Wants to Extend 'Foreign Agent' Label to Media

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By fall a string of Russia-based publications and broadcasting companies could be classified as “mass media outlets acting in the interests of foreign governments.”

United Russia wants to label media outlets financed from abroad as “foreign agents” and to gain the power to oust lawmakers without a court ruling, news reports said Monday.

The proposed crackdowns follow a week in which United Russia led efforts in the State Duma to pass legislation that brands “politically active” NGOs that receive money from abroad as “foreign agents” and drastically increases fines in defamation cases.

Dmitry Gudkov, a senior Duma deputy with A Just Russia, called the latest proposed measures a “continuation of this repressive policy.”

“This will not stop anything but will breed more hatred,” Gudkov said by phone.

The Duma may consider in the fall a [bill](#) that would brand as “foreign agents” media outlets

that receive more than 50 percent of their financing from abroad, Izvestia [reported](#) Monday, citing United Russia Deputies Vladimir Burmatov and Ilya Kostunov as its sources.

“Many media receive financing from abroad and act as a mouthpiece for a foreign government,” Kostunov told the daily.

But Mikhail Fedotov, head of the Kremlin’s human rights council and a lawyer by training, called the bill about foreign-financed media “pointless,” saying that the country’s mass media law, which he co-authored, already bans media outlets from receiving more than 50 percent of their financing from abroad.

“Making the financing of all the media transparent would be the right thing to do, but this has not been proposed,” Fedotov said by phone.

Pavel Gutiontov, secretary of the Union of Journalists of Russia, decried the measure as pure propaganda and an insult to some news outlets.

He also said he didn't understand why the Duma’s recently approved NGO bill labels some foreign-financed NGOs as “foreign agents” but makes an exception for state organizations that are financed from abroad, noting that he was more concerned as a taxpayer about what the national budget was spent on, including in the field of mass media.

Incidentally, state-financed English-language TV channel Russia Today had to secure an exemption last week in the NGO bill to avoid being labeled a foreign agent, since it is officially registered as a nongovernmental organization and receives payments from Google and YouTube, which are U.S. companies.

Meanwhile, a senior Duma source told Vedomosti in an [article](#) published Monday that parliament might consider a bill in the fall that would allow United Russia's majority in the lower chamber to strip lawmakers of their mandates without a court ruling for a variety of offenses.

Grounds for such punishment could include making comments to media outlets that are deemed to discredit parliament or disparage state authorities; receiving citations by the ethics committee for persistently skipping Duma sessions; failing to publish income declarations; or using diplomatic passports for personal trips abroad.

Gudkov said the measure would violate the Constitution. “It is not they [United Russia] who gave us mandates but the people, while United Russia only stole mandates,” he said, referring to December’s disputed Duma elections.

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