

United Russia's Spy Mania

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Some may have thought that the battle against "foreign agents" ended when the State Duma passed amendments to the law on nongovernmental organizations last Friday, the day before lawmakers adjourned for their summer recess. But even on vacation, the more ardent United Russia deputies simply couldn't rest as long as foreign agents were roaming around Russia, destabilizing the country.

A new front in the battle was opened on Monday when United Russia Deputies Ilya Kostunov and Vladimir Burmatov told Izvestia that foreign-financed media outlets should also be treated as foreign agents under the media law. They said the law is needed to target media "that act in the interests of foreign governments and interfere in the political affairs of Russia."

Presumably, this means the media would be subject to the same tough audit requirements and penalties that "politically active" foreign-funded NGOs will face. On Wednesday, United Russia Deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov put the foreign-financed media initiative on the Duma docket. The bill, Fyodorov said, will cover media outlets in Russia that receive funds or property from foreign sources.

At first glance, it would appear that these measures wouldn't apply to The Moscow Times, Vedomosti, Forbes Russia and the many other media outlets that have foreign ownership. After all, they are private, commercial enterprises with no ties to foreign governments, nor do they receive foreign government grants.

But nobody should underestimate the creative imagination of United Russia lawmakers. After all, the authors of the NGO bill believe that Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, Amnesty International and other NGOs — which are financed by private donations and receive no government money — also "act in the interests of foreign governments and interfere in Russia's internal affairs." Under the false pretext of "building democracy and protecting human rights," these NGOs, we are told, are really fulfilling a secret U.S.-orchestrated plan to discredit and destabilize Russia.

Apparently, United Russia believes the same could be said about some foreign-financed media. Burmatov told BFM.ru on Monday that a lot of what he sees in the foreign-funded media is really "anti-Russian propaganda." Kostunov said a battle against foreign media is necessary because they are a "mouthpiece of foreign propaganda."

But perhaps these United Russia deputies should take a look at how the news is presented on Russia's three main government-controlled television channels to get a better taste of state propaganda. If they need more evidence, perhaps they should watch "Anatomy of a Protest" or the other made-to-order hatchet jobs against the opposition that NTV broadcast during the December-March election season.

As with the NGO bill, Burmatov said the goal of placing foreign-financed media under the foreign-agent microscope would be to improve transparency. "Russians have a right to know the sources of financing for these outlets," he told Izvestia.

But if Burmatov really wants to improve transparency, he should focus on the lack of openness and accountability on all levels of government, including the country's huge, opaque state corporations.

For his part, Burmatov could start with his own institution — the Duma, where there is no law on lobbying. As a result, there is no control over deputies who are aggressively lobbied by leading industrial groups and businesspeople and who, it is widely believed, cut lucrative, multimillion-dollar inside deals. Corruption experts such as Kirill Kabanov say this lack of transparency and public accountability in the Duma has created one of the largest sources of corruption in the country.

The proposal to extend the NGO bill to foreign-financed media is a vivid example of what happens when election fraud goes unpunished and when Duma seats are handed out according to a closed party-list system. United Russia deputies like Burmatov, Kostunov and Fyodorov end up getting Duma seats they don't deserve and offering absurd bills that isolate Russia from the West and stir up public hysteria about hordes of foreign spies in NGOs and the media. On the other hand, because the Duma is so nontransparent, it is always difficult to tell when these kinds of bills are direct orders from the Kremlin or independent initiatives of over-zealous deputies trying to impress the Kremlin.

Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov came up with a great idea during his July 14 radio program on Ekho Moskv: If United Russia is determined to label foreign-financed NGOs and media outlets as "foreign agents," it would only be fair to label the journalists who are Kremlin mouthpieces as "Kremlin agents."

Since Putin recently promised to increase funding for his favorite Russian NGOs, it would only be fair to brand them as "Kremlin agents" as well.

In the true spirit of competition and proper labeling, let Russians choose between Kremlin agents or foreign agents and decide which they trust more. As Moscow Times columnist Georgy Bovt wrote in his July 4 column, Russians have always trusted foreign sources of information more than the state, and this tradition goes back many decades to the Soviet period.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin's witch hunt against foreign agents has also worried foreign business associations, such as the American Chamber of Commerce and the Association of European Businesses. This type of McCarthyism, if left uncontrolled, might have a negative impact on foreign investment. United Russia Deputy Fyodorov, one of the chief sponsors of the initiative targeting foreign media, should be well aware of this risk since he is head of the Duma's Committee on Economic Policy and Enterprise.

Who could be the next target after foreign-funded NGOs and the media? Perhaps United Russia will expand to foreign banks working in Russia. After all, they funded the Bolsheviks, helping them stage the 1917 Revolution.

The Kremlin's biggest fear is that the next Russian revolution will be orange, not red. This fear may be the best explanation for United Russia's latest flare-up of spy mania.

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