

Putin Signs Law Regulating NGOs

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Critics see Putin signing the NGO bill as an effort to suppress dissent.

President Vladimir Putin on Saturday signed into law a new measure that requires nongovernmental groups receiving funding from abroad and engaging in political activity to register as foreign agents with the Justice Ministry.

Some NGOs have vowed to ignore or circumvent the law, while its critics note that the vague definition of political activity could be applied to a wide range of initiatives. Putin, meanwhile, has claimed that recent protests against him were instigated and funded by the United States.

Some of the country's most prominent human rights groups are vowing to ignore or do what they must to sidestep the law on NGOs.

Lev Ponomaryov, head of For Human Rights, one of Russia's oldest NGOs, told Interfax that his group will ignore the regulation and challenge it in court.

"We will never be agents and won't submit to this law. We're agents of the Russian citizens," Ponomaryov said, adding that his group will continue to accept foreign funding.

But Lyudmila Alexeyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group and a veteran human rights activist, said her group would refuse foreign funding in order to get around the law, and that she's even preparing to auction off her collection of china and art to raise money.

"We will learn to live on very little money, in order to at least keep our office," she said on Echo Moskvy radio.

Earlier this month, the U.S. State Department voiced "deep concern" about the NGO law — and was promptly rebuked by Moscow for "gross interference," an exchange that underlined the impact the bill has had on already strained relations.

Putin said on Thursday that laws to open up competition in Russia's political system must be implemented with care, suggesting that he remains wary about reforms introduced after the wave of protests.

In April, then-President Dmitry Medvedev signed off on a law that eased regulations on the registration of political parties, cutting the required number of members in a party to 500 from the previous 40,000.

The law was aimed at appeasing demonstrators who had taken to the streets after accusations of voting fraud in State Duma elections in December that gave the pro-Kremlin United Russia party a slim parliamentary majority.

"It is necessary that the laws that were passed on a legislative level make their way into society correctly, peacefully and in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law," Putin said. "But in no case [may they] allow any destructive forces to shake up the situation or moreover allow them [to do so] in a destructive-terroristic way." ☒

(AP, Reuters)

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