

Patriots Are Destroying Russia

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov from the Just Russia party came up with an interesting proposal last week. He submitted a bill to the Duma that would hold deputies, senators and governors criminally liable if they don't disclose their foreign bank accounts, real estate, securities and other foreign investments.

Under the current disclosure law, which was introduced by Dmitry Medvedev during his presidency, public officials are also required to declare these assets. But Medvedev carved out a critical loophole in the legislation: There are no penalties for noncompliance, making the law all but useless.

Ponomaryov is now trying to close that hole. Failure to declare foreign-based assets would carry a criminal fine of up to 5 million rubles (\$156,000), up to 480 hours of community service and a prohibition on serving in government for five years. This is a good start, but these penalties are probably too light to be effective, particularly against the more wealthy violators.

The bill, which Ponomaryov hopes will be considered in the Duma in September, also goes one

step further by applying to all of the country's 1.5 million bureaucrats — from the municipal level all the way up to the Kremlin and White House. The requirements apply to their direct family members as well, to help prevent corrupt bureaucrats from using their favorite trick: shifting ownership of foreign assets to wives, children and other relatives.

The only problem is that there is little chance the bill will pass.

Ponomarev, who has been active in the opposition protests since December, is also an outspoken opponent of the law that requires foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations that engage in "political activity" to register with the Justice Ministry as "foreign agents."

He gave a spectacular [speech](#) in the Duma in early July in which he claimed that United Russia is actually the country's "largest foreign agent" because so many of its members have participated in programs funded by the U.S. State Department.

Ponomarev's bill on disclosing foreign assets is an appropriate response to United Russia, particularly considering the party's current frenzy to expose foreign agents among NGOs. After all, the best place to start looking for foreign agents is not within Golos, Transparency International or Human Rights Watch, but among suspiciously wealthy members of the Duma and Federation Council and among other public officials who stash their assets abroad out of the public view.

Moreover, the bill requires these public officials to post information about their foreign assets on the official website of the government entity where they are employed. Let the people see the true faces of these "Russian patriots." After all, these are often the same people who cry the loudest against "foreign agents" among NGOs and the opposition — those who are supposedly working so hard to destroy Russia. But in reality, these officials do more to weaken and destroy Russia than any real foreign agents could ever dream of doing.

Ponomarev's bill is aimed at introducing at least some degree of transparency in government. Even in those cases where public officials are able to justify their wealth, they would still need to explain to their constituents why they hold their assets abroad, not in Russia. After all, if their treasures are abroad, so are their hearts. This calls into question how committed these so-called public servants are to developing and serving their own country.

Critics of Ponomarev's proposal argue that it won't work because it is often difficult to verify the existence of bureaucrats' foreign assets. But this is often not true. For example, anti-corruption fighter Alexei Navalny said it was relatively easy to expose Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin's real estate and his residency permit in the Czech Republic, which he never included on his declaration forms. Most of the information, Navalny said, was available on Czech government websites. Investigators from Hermitage Capital were also able to determine the foreign location of assets owned by public officials on the Magnitsky list.

Unfortunately, there are only a limited number of Navalnys and Hermitages who are willing to take on these battles. That is why Ponomarev's bill is so badly needed. It would strengthen the disclosure law for public officials based on existing resources in the Federal Tax Service.

Surprisingly, Ponomaryov's proposal has received initial support from two top officials within United Russia: Deputy Duma Speaker Sergei Zheleznyak and Deputy Federation Council Speaker Alexander Torshin, who told journalists last week, "This law is entirely logical and is line with the political task of establishing more transparency in the government."

This may sound promising, but don't expect the majority of United Russia deputies to hit the "za" button if Ponomaryov's bill ever comes up for a vote. There are few examples of lawmakers passing laws that take away their own key privileges. This explains, for example, why the Duma has never passed a law regulating lobbying, a huge income-producer for many deputies.

Of course, it would be difficult for United Russia politicians to justify a vote against Ponomaryov's proposal if it ever reaches the floor. On the other hand, party members could always resort to their typical line of reasoning. They could say Ponomaryov is really a U.S. foreign agent and that his attempt to force Russia's public officials to declare their foreign assets is just another example of "Western interference in Russia's internal affairs."

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