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Treason Bill Gains Momentum

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The FSB's headquarters on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad. The FSB drafted the new treason bill.

The State Duma tentatively approved a bill on Friday to broaden the legal definition of high treason, seen by human rights groups as part of a continuing crackdown on foreign-funded organizations in Russia.

While lawmakers contend that the bill would make the work of law enforcement authorities more effective, rights activists say it would enable the state to undermine the activity of any person or NGO in the country.

According to the bill, which passed its first reading with unanimous approval, any individual or group found relaying a state secret to a "foreign government or international, foreign organization" can be charged with high treason, punishable with up to 20 years in prison.

Last week, the U.S. Agency for International Development announced that it would cease its activities in Russia after the government accused it of using funds to influence elections. As of Nov. 20, a new law will compel all organizations receiving money from abroad to register as

"foreign agents."

Prominent human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov said the current bill, which would apply to acts "undermining national security, constitutional order, territorial or state integrity," could be used to consider any opposition activity dangerous.

"The bill has very broad definitions of treason and espionage," he said. "While previously only those who had official access to National Security Information could be brought to trial for disclosing it, now everyone who accidentally becomes aware of secret information can be convicted."

"The previously passed bills [on non-governmental organizations] and the bill currently under consideration are parts of the same chain strapped to the neck of NGOs," said Alexander Nikitin, head of St. Petersburg branch of Bellona, an international environment protection agency.

Nikitin was charged with treason for reporting about nuclear safety to Bellona in 1996. "In fact," he added, "the amendments will allow the Federal Security Service to prosecute people working in NGOs for their professional activity."

Backers say the bill would facilitate a crackdown on espionage.

"We should include international organizations on the list of agents that can be charged with treason due to the fact that foreign intelligence agencies actively use them to camouflage their spying activity," FSB deputy head Yury Gorbunov told the Duma on Friday, Interfax reported.

Gorbunov claimed that the bill would distinguish between espionage as a high treason and espionage as a crime committed by a foreign citizen, and would allow prosecution of international organizations accused of such a crime.

In 2004, nuclear specialist Igor Sutyagin was convicted of espionage for revealing purportedly classified information to a London-based company, even though the information was publicly available, rights activist Ponomaryov said.

"Sutyagin was charged illegally then, but this new bill would allow him to be considered guilty," Ponomaryov said.

Also on Friday, Radio Liberty/RFE announced that it would cease AM radio broadcasting in Moscow on Nov. 10 and switch over to multimedia Internet broadcasting, said Yelena Glushkova, head of the radio station's Russian office.

Glushkova said the decision was due to new legislation that bans radio broadcasting by companies more than 5 percent owned by foreign individuals or legal entities.

The Memorial human rights group said Friday in a statement that it would not register as a foreign agent with the Justice Ministry, even though it received grants from USAID.

Earlier, the Moscow Helsinki Group and the For Human Rights movement repeatedly said they would not register by the time late November when the respective law comes into effect.

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