

Treason Law Expanded Despite Putin's Pledge

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Standing atop a display case at the Central House of Artists, a miniature porcelain bust of President Vladimir Putin is for sale among other knickknacks. The definition of treason was expanded Wednesday to include "international" groups despite Putin's pledge Monday to reconsider the measure. **Vladimir Filonov**

Amendments expanding the legal definition of treason came into effect Wednesday despite a presidential pledge two days before that the clause would be reconsidered.

Now, Russians who work for international organizations can be tried as traitors, according to the amended Article 151 of the Criminal Code, which went into effect following publication of the redactions in the state's official newspaper, Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

The listing indicated that the amendments had been approved by President Vladimir Putin on Monday, the same day he told a meeting of his human rights council that he would review the text.

At that meeting, Putin said he was "ready to return" to the amendments to look at them more "carefully."

"There shouldn't be any broader definition of state treason, [and] it shouldn't address issues that have nothing to do with the instance of state treason," he said.

But his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told reporters Wednesday that the president meant that the amendments could be adjusted if "problem areas" were to arise.

The expanded definition of treason includes divulging a state secret or "providing consulting or other work to a foreign state or international organization" if said organization works against Russian security interests. Traitors can be punished by up to 20 years in prison.

The previous version of the same law had referred only to "foreign organizations," not "international" ones.

The amendments could affect human rights activists who work with international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Independent political analyst Pavel Salin told The Moscow Times that Putin's comment on possibly revising the text indicated that the Kremlin had felt pressure from the public regarding the changes.

"The entire scientific community is outraged because any relationship with a foreigner, if it is proven that he's a spy, can be considered treason," Salin said by phone Wednesday.

Since 2002, more than two dozen people have been jailed under the treason law. Several cases involved prominent scientists collaborating with foreign organizations.

One of them was Siberian physicist Valentin Danilov, who was sentenced to 13 years in prison in 2004 for selling space technology secrets to China. He was granted parole Tuesday after spending almost a decade behind bars, including his pretrial detention.

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