

Russian Bill to Ban 'Undesirable' Foreign Companies Passes 1st Reading

By [Anna Dolgov](#)

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Road signs are pictured in front of an arch with a portrait of Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the entrance to the town of Argun, outside Grozny.

Russia's parliament has given preliminary approval to a bill that would prohibit the activities of "undesirable" foreign companies and organizations in Russia, should they be deemed to present a threat to the state.

The bill, adopted in the first reading on Monday, targets any foreign entity that "presents a threat to the defense capability or security of the state, or to public order, or to the health of population," according to the text of the bill published on the State Duma website.

Those groups may be declared "undesirable on the territory of the Russian Federation," the bill says, adding that the purpose of the move would be to protect, among other aspects, the "morality" of the nation.

This could mean that any foreign company or organization that Moscow sees as unfriendly may be outlawed.

Alexander Tarnavsky, one of the authors of the bill and a member of A Just Russia party, told TASS that the proposed legislation aimed to "establish that there are foreign organizations that are unfriendly to Russia."

Fellow lawmaker Frants Klintsevich, the deputy faction chief of the ruling United Russia party, added that the bill was intended to protect the sovereignty of the country, TASS reported.

Over the past year, officials have increasingly referenced the "threat" posed to Russia's sovereignty to dismiss Western criticism of its annexation of Crimea and its policy on Ukraine.

"[We are paying the price for] protecting our independence, our sovereignty and our right to exist," Putin said last month of Western sanctions against Russia, telling a news conference that Western governments were trying to "chain" the Russian "bear."

Under the new bill, organizations that are labeled "undesirable" may see their offices and branches in Russia shut down, and may be banned from distributing any information, including online.

Tarnavsky said his bill would also cover foreign NGOs that operate in Russia and have so far been exempt from the loaded "foreign agent" label that the government can apply to Russian groups that receive funding from abroad and engage in vaguely defined political activity, RBK reported earlier this month.

But unlike Russian groups slapped with the "foreign agent" label, foreign "undesirables" would be banned from having any presence in the country, Tarnavsky was quoted by RBK as saying.

The decision on whether or not an organization is "undesirable" is to be made by the Russian Prosecutor General's office, "in consultation with a federal body of executive power" — such as security agencies — according to the bill.

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