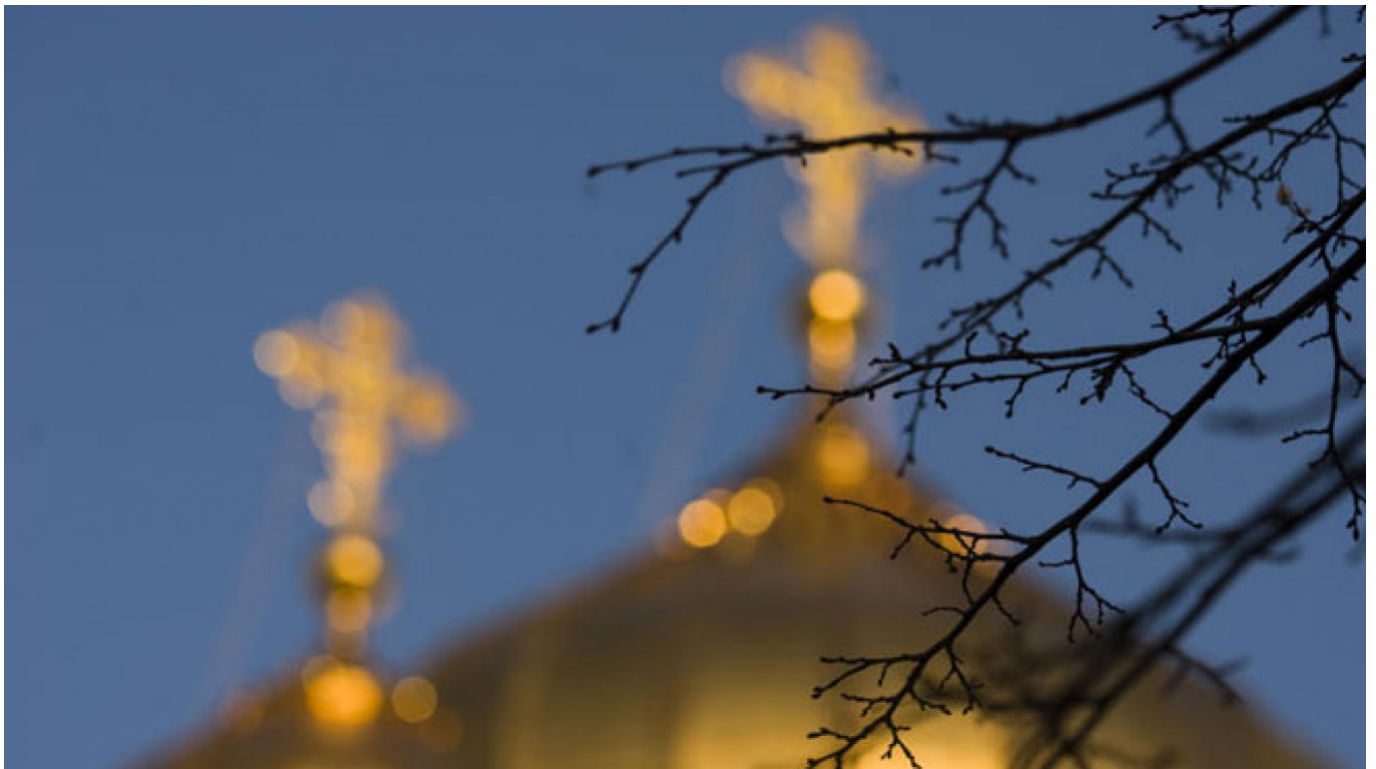


Justice Ministry Moves to Crack Down on Foreign-Funded Religious Groups

By [Yekaterina Gladkova](#)

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The proposal implies that religious organizations should maintain financial records distinguishing between foreign and domestic sources of funding.

The Justice Ministry has moved to embolden the authorities to crack down on religious organizations that receive funding from abroad, but the ministry's press service moved Wednesday to dispel fears that the law is simply a religious variation on Russia's controversial "foreign agents" legislation.

A bill submitted to the State Duma last week would enable the Justice Ministry to monitor religious organizations in Russia, and request the financial records of those that acquire funding from abroad, or that are found to have any involvement in terrorist or extremist activities.

Under the bill, the failure of religious organizations to hand over requested documents establishes grounds for the Justice Ministry to file a court claim for the given organization's

liquidation.

Some critics have noted that the law bears a certain resemblance to a 2012 amendment to Russia's law on nongovernmental organizations that relegated politically active NGOs that receive funding from abroad to a list of foreign agents, a politically loaded term historically associated with espionage.

In comments to The Moscow Times on Wednesday, the Justice Ministry said that the draft law on religious organizations was primarily modeled on the law on NGOs, but denied that the new bill will have the same effect as the foreign agents amendment.

"Provisions of the Law on Nongovernmental Organizations that apply to [NGOs] that function as foreign agents do not apply to religious organizations," the Justice Ministry said with regard to the draft law.

The proposal implies that religious organizations should maintain financial records distinguishing between foreign and domestic sources of funding. All funds originating abroad will be subject to government scrutiny, a process that is set to involve both planned and unannounced inspections.

Yaroslav Nilov, head of the State Duma committee on public associations and religious organizations, said in comments carried by Gazeta.ru that the proposal aims to make the financial activities of 25,000 officially registered religious organizations in Russia more transparent.

Alexander Dvorkin, a religious expert for the Ministry of Justice, suggested that certain organizations, such as Mormonism, Scientology and certain offshoots of Hinduism risk coming under fire if the law is successfully passed.

The Supreme Court approved Russia's first region-wide ban in 2014 of the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group, deeming them "extremist," in the southeastern region of Samara.

The draft law would amend the existing federal Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations.

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