

Putin Raises 'Extremism' Fines for Russian Media Tenfold

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President Vladimir Putin signed the measure into law on May 2, one day shy of World Press Freedom Day.

President Vladimir Putin signed legislation Saturday that will increase tenfold the maximum fine that can be levied on Russian news organizations accused of inciting extremism, raising fears of increased pressure on the country's remaining independent media outlets.

The changes mean that Russia's Internet watchdog, in conjunction with magistrate courts, can order news organizations to pay up to 1 million rubles (\$19,000) for publishing material deemed to incite or justify terrorism or extremism. Previously, similar fines were restricted to between 50,000 and 100,000 rubles.

The new measure also gives the authorities the right to confiscate all copies of extremist material appearing in offline formats.

A lack of clarity over the legal definition of extremism means the new amendment "is open to abuse and arbitrary application," said media law specialist Andrei Richter in comments to The Moscow Times on Monday.

The Kremlin has moved to tighten state control over Russia's already heavily regulated media industry in recent years with the shuttering of more liberal news outlets, new restrictions on foreign ownership and the appointment of outspoken Kremlin loyalists to top media roles.

The amendment, which has been in the process of development for over a year, was first conceived in the wake of violent nationalist rioting in the Moscow suburb of Biryulyovo in 2013, Deputy Communications Minister Alexei Volin told business daily Vedomosti in December last year when the law was introduced in the Russian parliament.

"During its development we decided not to be limited to the interethnic aspects and use the wider concepts of terrorism and extremism," Volin told Vedomosti.

The amendment was passed by Russia's State Duma on April 25. Four days later it was approved by the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament. Putin signed the measure into law on May 2, one day shy of World Press Freedom Day.

Lawmakers involved in the drafting of the bill said earlier this year that the new rules mean Internet and media watchdog Roskomnadzor will be able to impose fines rather than simply issuing official warnings, according to the RBC news website.

Extremism warnings have been handed out to news outlets critical of the Kremlin. In October, liberal radio station Ekho Moskvyy was warned over a broadcast about accounts of fighting in eastern Ukraine and opposition Novaya Gazeta was cautioned over a piece the same month that compared policies of Russian lawmakers to those of Adolf Hitler.

Nineteen news organizations in Russia were warned over the reprinting of Muhammed caricatures by French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, Roskomnadzor head Alexander Zharov said last week.

In accordance with Russia's extremism laws, any media outlet that receives two written warnings within a year can have its media license revoked.

Some experts warned that the fines could be used in addition to shuttering news organizations. "There will be a double punishment: a ruble punishment in the form of an administrative fine and punishment in the form of an end to media activity," the head of the Kremlin's human rights council Mikhail Fedotov told Business FM radio station Sunday. "Such things are impossible in a state that observes the rule of law."

Critics also fear that large fines could be used to bankrupt news organizations that are run on tight budgets and are already suffering from sharp falls in advertising revenue linked to Russia's economic crisis.

Experts pointed to ambiguities in the definition of extremism, which could be used by the authorities to exploit the legislation for their own ends and silence those critical of the current regime.

"The definition [of extremism] is vague and as such it was criticized by the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe's Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission... by Russia's Presidential Council on Human Rights and indirectly by Russia's Supreme Court," Moscow State University's Richter said in written comments.

Legally, extremism is defined as a call to change the constitutional order or a call for separatism, and is punishable by up to five years in prison. More than 600 sentences were handed down under extremism clauses last year, according to Business FM.

Despite concerns, the imposition of penalties under extremism legislation has ticked up.

Since December 2013, Roskomnadzor has had the power to close down websites without a court order.

About 4,500 websites were blocked in Russia in 2014 because of alleged extremist content, Roskomnadzor's head said last week. Blocked online platforms include the blog of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Kremlin-hostile news website Grani.ru.

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