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Germany Raps Russia Over Law Against 'Undesirable' NGOs

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Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert

BERLIN — Germany on Wednesday criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin for signing a law allowing security officials to ban foreign and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) if they are deemed undesirable.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said during a regular press conference in Berlin that the law was an attempt to further isolate and discredit members of civil society who were critical of the government.

The decision is a "step into the wrong direction," Seibert said, adding that German-Russian ties could be further strained by the move.

Russia has accused the West of engineering the overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Moscow president Viktor Yanukovych last year through its support for NGOs. Shortly afterward, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and has been supporting pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

The disputed law, signed by Putin last week, is aimed at barring foreign NGOs from the country if they are deemed to pose a threat to Russia's constitutional order, defense or security.

The law further increases pressure on NGOs after Russia enforced new rules in 2012 obliging groups that engage in "political activity" and receive any funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents," a move decried by Kremlin critics as an attempt to muzzle dissent.

The new law allows for a ban on the operations in Russia of any NGO declared "undesirable" by the prosecutor general and introduces financial penalties, community service, restrictions on movement or jail terms of up to six years for those violating it.

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