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# Russia's Foreign Agents Law Is Recipe for Disaster

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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The law on international and foreign "undesirable organizations" that the State Duma adopted, President Vladimir Putin signed and that entered into force has once again radically worsened the situation for nongovernmental organizations in Russia. The Prosecutor General's Office will soon begin formulating the list of undesirable organizations, making it clear exactly whom the authorities will target.

Regardless of which organizations are singled out, it is obvious that the law was passed quickly with the goal of completely severing the connection between Russian NGOs and their foreign partners prior to State Duma elections in 2016 and presidential elections in 2018.

At a March 26 meeting with the Federal Security Service, Putin clearly spelled out the Kremlin's logic. According to his world view, the West — led by the United States — is pursuing a policy of "containment" against Russia, and is using every possible means toward that end: from attempts to isolate Russia and apply economic pressure, to large-scale information war and activities by Western intelligence agencies.

Putin draws a direct connection between Russian NGOs and the activities of Western intelligence agencies that, in his opinion, are trying to use civic, nongovernmental and politicized organizations to "discredit the authorities and destabilize the international situation in Russia."

What's more, Putin claims to have information showing that Western intelligence has already planned actions for Russia's election campaigns from 2016 to 2018. Accordingly, the law on undesirable organizations aims to harshly suppress any attempts by Western intelligence agencies to use international and foreign NGOs toward that goal.

For the first time in post-Soviet practice, the decision of which groups to label as undesirable foreign and international NGOs will be made in purely administrative manner — by the Prosecutor General or his deputy and without the involvement of the courts. Meanwhile, the Justice Ministry will draw up the list of those organizations, as well as the list of Russian NGOs deemed "foreign agents."

The new law is extremely harsh. Organizations labeled as "undesirable" will lose the right to operate, maintain offices or hold bank accounts in Russia. In addition, Russians that dare to cooperate with such organizations — apparently, in any form — will face administrative and even criminal prosecution. Thus, not only will foreign NGOs find themselves under the heel of Russia's law enforcement agencies and the FSB, but also, and primarily, Russian citizens.

The objective is to completely sever Russians' ties with such organizations — including the right to participate in seminars and conferences, publish articles and books and possibly even post their materials on personal pages in social networks.

The authorities began cracking down on NGOs in 2005-06 when they first adopted legislation complicating the process of reporting to government agencies, including the submission of financial reports.

The next phase in 2007-11 marked the creation of a large number of pro-Kremlin NGOs that simulated human rights and related activities, but that were led by the Public Chamber of Russia.

The third phase began after the mass protests of 2011-12, when the authorities concluded that Western sponsors stood behind the huge rallies at Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova — what came to be called the Decembrists' Movement 2.0.

The result was the passage of a law in 2012 labeling NGOs that receive even partial foreign funding as "foreign agents." Not a single major or authoritative Russian NGO deigned to adopt this shameful label and, as a result, some were forced to close down or else restructure and scale down their activities.

Now the authorities have decided to finally rid themselves of the international NGO network operating in Russia and that poses a potential danger. The State Duma has already formally requested the Prosecutor General's Office review such organizations as Memorial, Transparency International, the Carnegie Moscow Center, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

The fact that no link has ever been shown to exist between such organizations and Western intelligence agencies will not prevent the Russian authorities from cracking down on them.

In all likelihood, the authorities will completely ban all foreign and international organizations from Russia that are involved in protecting human rights, exposing corruption, observing elections, monitoring prisons and preventing the torture of inmates and attempting to establish societal control over the army and siloviki structures. It is also possible that a similar ban could apply to international environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund.

What's more, a real threat now hangs over educational organizations promoting modern and non-ideological world views. For example, German foundations could get the ax if Russian-German relations continue to deteriorate.

Severing connections between Russian NGOs and their foreign partners will have disastrous consequences for them. Ever since the government seized and dismantled Yukos and jailed its former CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russian businesses have shrunk from supporting NGOs with social or politically related activities.

And the authorities never miss a chance to dissuade the business community from rendering such support — most recently by waging a primitive attack against the Dynasty Foundation of Dmitry Zimin and Liberal Mission headed by Yevgeny Yasin. Even without such pressures, it was never easy to elicit financial assistance in a society where no such tradition has ever existed.

Given those limitations, foreign partners remained practically the only source of funding for work and continued existence for many NGOs. The current ban will force them to cease operations and either disappear or go underground, as happened during Soviet rule.

With this law, the Russian government has sent a clear signal that it will no longer tolerate any more unauthorized activities or initiatives in the political, economic, cultural, moral or public life of the country. And that is a guaranteed recipe for decay and decline.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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