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7 New Laws That Will Change the Face of Russia

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Russian lawmakers have kept themselves very busy this year. Over the course of its spring session, which ended Friday, Russia's State Duma passed a total of 278 new laws.

The majority of these were unremarkable — ratifications to international agreements, minor budgetary adjustments and a busload of measures aimed at integrating Crimea into the federal fold following Russia's 2014 annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine.

But a small handful of these new laws pack a powerful punch, standing to make a profound impact on Russia's political and economic future:

Undesirable Organizations

With tensions mounting between Russia and the West over the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Moscow has been hyper-vigilant in monitoring for potential sources of foreign-sponsored unrest within its borders.

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly sounded the alarm over what he sees as the role of Western NGOs in perpetuating "color revolutions," a term used to describe popular uprisings such as Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution and Ukraine's 2004-05 Orange Revolution.

In a bid to avoid such a scenario on Russian soil, the Duma passed a law in May vesting the Prosecutor General's Office and the Foreign Ministry with the power to declare as "undesirable" foreign NGOs seen as posing a threat to Russian national security.

Members of Russian civil society and international NGOs have blasted the law, casting it not as a noble effort to protect national security, but as a crackdown on dissent — a move aimed at leveling Russia's political landscape.

See also: Russia's FSB to Help Compile 'Patriotic Stop-List' of Undesirable NGOs and Russia Only Has Itself to Blame for Lost Influence in Post-Soviet Sphere

Foreign Agents No More

A number of Russian organizations wound up on a similarly stigma-laden registry following the adoption of a 2010 law that relegated loosely termed "politically active" NGOs receiving funds from abroad to a list of "foreign agents," a term widely associated with espionage.

The law forced many NGOs either to shut their doors or to significantly reshuffle their operations. After the Dynasty Foundation, Russia's largest private donor supporting science, was declared a foreign agent in May, its founder Dmitry Zimin vowed to shut the foundation's doors. In late June, daily newspaper Kommersant reported that the organization was on the brink of closure.

Previously, there had been no set procedure for NGOs to exclude themselves from the registry. But under new legislation adopted by the State Duma in February, the foreign agents list is no longer the dead end it once appeared to be.

During their spring session, lawmakers introduced a way out for foreign agents that had severed ties with their international donors since having landed on the list.

So far, two NGOs have taken advantage of the exit procedure.

Not everyone has benefitted from the new legislation, however. Prominent Moscow-based NGO For Human Rights' application for exclusion under the new protocol has been denied, Kommersant reported on Monday.

Clamping Down on Extremism

The government's fear of internal dissent was further reflected in the State Duma's decision in April to increase fines for disseminating information with the potential to incite extremism or terrorism.

Critics have voiced concern that the law could be used to subdue media outlets critical of the Russian authorities. In comments made to The Moscow Times shortly after the amendment was signed into law, media law specialist Andrei Richter said a lack of clarity over the legal definition of "extremism" left the legislation "open to abuse and arbitrary application."

In October, liberal radio station Ekho Moskvy received an extremism warning over a broadcast about accounts of fighting in eastern Ukraine, and opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta was cautioned over a piece the same month that compared policies of Russian lawmakers with those of Adolf Hitler.

Media organizations now face fines of up to 1 million rubles ($17,700), whereas the upper limit for such violations previously stood at 100,000 rubles.

Any media outlet that receives two written warnings within a year can likewise have its media license revoked.

See also: Putin Raises 'Extremism' Fines for Russian Media Tenfold

Right to be Forgotten

Going out with a bang, Duma deputies adopted a law Friday during their final hearing of the season giving Russian Internet users the "right to be forgotten."

Russian netizens will now be able to request that search engines remove personal information that is either false or no longer relevant due to a change in circumstances, the TASS news agency reported.

Yandex, Russia's leading search engine, slammed the bill, saying it limited free access to open data.

See also: Russia Adopts Law Giving Internet Users the 'Right to Be Forgotten'

Victory Day Amnesty

In April, the State Duma adopted a sweeping amnesty in honor of the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory against Nazi Germany. Victory Day is celebrated annually on May 9.

Some 127,000 convicts had already been set free under the amnesty, state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported Monday. The vast majority of them — some 106,000 — were serving sentences that did not involve imprisonment.

The amnesty was expected to free up to 60,000 inmates serving sentences in Russian prisons, but only 16,702 have so far been able to walk free. An additional 3,844 people were released from pretrial detention centers, RIA Novosti reported.

The amnesty was expected to free up to 400,000 convicts within half a year, news site Gazeta.ru reported last week, but in some regions its progress has been stymied by bureaucratic hurdles.

See also: Amnesty of Russian Prisoners Won't Include Corporate Raiding Victims

Capital Amnesty

Lawmakers did not limit grants of amnesty to the human realm. In May, the Duma adopted capital amnesty legislation designed to limit the outflow of Russian money.

In accordance with the capital amnesty, Russian citizens and legal entities are entitled to declare their offshore assets without fear of being held to account for criminal, administrative or tax indiscretions that may have occurred in connection with the assets prior to the start of 2015.

Of the up to 100,000 Russian entities believed to have assets abroad, less than 4,000 have thus far come forward to take advantage of the amnesty, business newspaper Vedomosti reported Monday.

See also: Quarter of Russians' Wealth to Stay Offshore Despite Putin's Pleas

Early Elections

Ending the spring season in a blaze of glory, lawmakers won the Constitutional Court's approval to push the upcoming State Duma elections up three months.

In June, lawmakers gave tentative approval to move the December 2016 elections up three months to September. Russia's highest court ruled last week that doing so would not violate the Constitution, clearing the way for lawmakers to move forward with early elections.

During their final session of the season Friday, Duma deputies did precisely that.

Critics have speculated that the move was motivated by a desire to hold elections at a time of year when political activity tends to be at a lull — when many Russians would rather be vacationing or relaxing in their dachas far from the bustling city than waiting in line at a polling station.

See also: Why Russia Has Early Elections

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