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Kremlin Forms NGO Expert Group

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Vyacheslav Volodin

The Kremlin has announced the creation of an expert group to consider changes to a controversial law that labels NGOs receiving funding from abroad as "foreign agents," the RBC news agency reported Monday, citing deputy presidential chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin.

The group will work within the presidential administration and will consist of parliamentary deputies, officials and members of the Civic Chamber, RBC reported.

The law on foreign agents has been broadly criticized for failing to adequately define the "political activity" that is required to qualify for the label, and for stigmatizing NGOs and evoking a Stalin-era spy mania. In June, President Vladimir Putin told the Civic Chamber that the law required “additional correction.”

The expert group, which will begin its work in September, will decide whether there is any need for legislative changes, Volodin told a conference for NGO employees held in the town of Klyazma in Russia's central Vladimir region over the weekend, according to RBC.

The decision to create the group was taken in response to a request from the Presidential Human Rights Council seeking clarification about the foreign agent law, RBC reported Monday, citing Yelena Topoleva-Soldunova, a member of both the Civic Chamber and the Human Rights Council.

Dozens of Russian NGOs have been labeled foreign agents since the law came into force in 2012, and several prominent organizations including human rights group the Committee Against Torture and the Dynasty science foundation have closed their doors rather than accept the label.

Volodin, a Kremlin heavyweight in charge of domestic politics, told the conference that Russia's NGO sector employs 670,000 people and is developing positively, the TASS news agency reported.

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