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# Russia's 'Foreign Agents' Risk Losing Right to Run Media

By Daria Litvinova

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The crackdown on the media is being carried out in anticipation of the State Duma elections in 2016, said Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos.

As the crackdown on Russian NGOs continues, the Communications Ministry has suggested forbidding those labeled as "foreign agents" from launching and registering media outlets.

The proposal, part of a bill that the ministry published on a government website for draft laws, stipulates that non-governmental organizations registered as "foreign agents" — a label with strong connotations of espionage in Russia that is applied to organizations that receive funding from abroad and are engaged in loosely defined political activity — cannot be founders of media outlets.

Civil rights advocates fear the bill is a marker of the situation worsening for the "foreign agents," several of which said they were closing this summer after being forced to pay six-figure fines in rubles and having to give up their foreign financing, despite earlier promises

that “foreign agents” would not have to close their doors.

Forbidding “foreign agents” from owning media is a direct violation of a Constitutional Court ruling of 2014, according to which this status shouldn't infringe on the organization's rights, said Ilya Shablinsky, a member of the presidential Human Rights Council.

“This bill is the next step after restricting the agents' rights in the electoral legislation [they are already banned from participating in electoral campaigns in any capacity],” he was cited by Vedomosti newspaper as saying Thursday.

“And this is very bad: we have more than 50 organizations on the list [of 'foreign agents'], and for a lot of them, running media outlets is their main area of activity,” he said.

Deputy Communications Minister Alexei Volin disagreed, telling Vedomosti that the suggestion doesn't violate any laws, and on the contrary, brings the law that regulates mass media in line with other laws, as well as conforming to existing regulation that restricts foreign ownership of media outlets.

But unlike actual foreigners, “foreign agents” should not be allowed to own even 20 percent of a media outlet, he said.

“We don't recommend having foreign agents among the owners of your media, go find some decent people [instead],” he was cited by the newspaper as saying Thursday.

### Free Speech Crackdown

There are some 20 existing media outlets that are owned by NGOs registered as “foreign agents,” said Pavel Chikov, head of the Agora human rights association.

For example, elections watchdog Golos, which is currently in the process of getting its “foreign agent” status revoked, runs the newspaper Grazhdansky Golos (Civic Voice), while Memorial, an NGO that advocates the rehabilitation of victims of Soviet repressions, runs Kavkazsky Uzel (Caucasus Knot), one of the most prominent media outlets in the North Caucasus.

“Passing the bill would mean that these media outlets will lose their registration,” Chikov told Vedomosti on Thursday. “This law will result in the liquidation of dozens of media outlets,” he said.

The crackdown on the media is being carried out in anticipation of the State Duma elections in 2016, said Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos.

“First the Central Election Commission sent out letters banning 'foreign agents' from delegating election observers to the polls, while most of these organizations actually usually send observers in the form of journalists,” he was cited by Vedomosti as saying Thursday.

The bill, according to Melkonyants, would not only seriously infringe on foreign agents' rights, but would also complicate the registration process for other media, meaning existing registration would be revoked from many organizations — especially those whose staff have used their credentials to report on elections.

## Morality Check

The bill proposes several other restrictions on the registration of Russian media.

For example, the names of countries would not be allowed to be used in media names without permission from the Justice Ministry, according to the document, along with the names of various organizations and people without their own permission. The names of the outlets will also be checked for “humanness” and “morality,” the text of the bill says, without elaborating.

A media outlet can be denied registration at the Prosecutor General's request, the bill states. This is only natural under anti-extremism legislation, Volin from the Communications Ministry told Vedomosti — the Prosecutor General is empowered to determine whether the media outlet is extremist, thus he has the right to deny it registration.

All in all, the initiative currently looks raw and poorly thought through, said Leonid Levin, chair of the State Duma Committee for Information Policy. Formally speaking, forbidding foreign agents from owning media seems reasonable, but on the other hand it can be seen as an infringement upon freedom of speech, the lawmaker added.

“We're not forbidding people who work for foreign companies from expressing their opinion,” Levin, a member of the Just Russia party, was cited by Vedomosti as saying Thursday. He also questioned the need for regulation in addition to limiting foreign ownership to 20 percent of a media outlet.

Nevertheless, “all these issues should be discussed, and we're ready to listen to what the ministry has to say,” the lawmaker said.

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