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Russia's New Law Against Foreign Media 'Won't Even Work'

New amendments targeting U.S. media could implicate news organizations from other countries too

By Evan Gershkovich

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Jaap Arriens / Zuma / TASS

After the Kremlin-backed RT news outlet begrudgingly registered as a foreign agent on Monday, Russia promised to retaliate. Earlier on Wednesday, its lawmakers did just that.

New legislation, which will allow authorities to brand any international media organization a "foreign agent," passed swiftly through three readings in the State Duma today, ending in a 414-0 vote. President Vladimir Putin is expected to sign the amendments into law by the end of the month.

State Duma vice speaker Pyotr Tolstoy told The Moscow Times that the United States forced Russia's hand. "We are learning from our American colleagues, and we are trying to keep up," he said.

Tolstoy said that lawmakers will also consider whether U.S. advertising is detrimental to Russian voters, referring to Twitter's ban on advertising from RT and Sputnik last month.

"I don't know what people expect from us," he added. "But Russia is not a country that will go without a response."

U.S. officials say that RT's registration under the obscure 1938 Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) will not limit the network's ability to work in the country, but will only require the outlet to disclose its mission and funding.

The Russian response, however, takes much broader measures.

While the State Duma's legislation does not include a list of media organizations to be targeted, Russian media has previously reported that Voice of America and Radio Free Europe — which receive government funding — the privately-owned CNN and Germany's public broadcaster Deutsche Welle could be affected. On Wednesday, lawmakers said that Russia's Justice Ministry would select the outlets.

Sergei Neverov, a lawmaker representing the United Russia party, assured reporters on Wednesday that the new legislation will not affect Russian media outlets that receive a significant chunk of foreign funding.

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"This draft law does not regulate the Russian media in any way," he said. "It is a question of foreign media and their activities on the territory of the Russian Federation."

The legislation states that outlets designated "foreign agents" would have to follow the same requirements applied to foreign-funded NGOs.

The organizations that land in the Justice Ministry's registry under the 2012 law are subject to additional checks and are required to identify all publications as having been produced by a "foreign agent," a label with Soviet-era connotations of espionage. They also have to submit regular reports on their funding, objectives and expenses.

Speaking on Rossia-1 on Wednesday, State Duma deputy Yevgeny Revenko said that staff of foreign media who refuse to register as foreign agents under the new legislation could face up to two years in prison.

"I believe that the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation will quickly take advantage of these opportunities," Revenko added.

Nikolai Svanidze, the head of the Human Rights Council's commission on civil liberties, told The Moscow Times Wednesday that the move "follows the format of the Cold War." But, he

said, while the Russian legislation is a “formal mirror response” to the U.S., it takes far broader measures, and is “absolutely unjust.”

“RT is a government outlet, but CNN is not,” he said. “And this new legislation does not only apply to American channels, but any outlet with foreign funding.”

Svanidze blamed the United States for the new legislation, calling its move to force RT to register “an absolutely absurd decision.” Although he conceded that Russia was “already heading in this direction,” he said that the “RT decision sped it up.”

Russia’s human rights ombudsman Mikhail Fedotov told The Moscow Times that the law was written poorly. “In practice, the law won’t even work," he said, because the Duma deputies confused the legal definition of media.

“The president should send the law back to the Duma,” Fedotov added. “You can’t write laws this way. It degrades our legal system.”

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