

AI Index: PRE 01/342/2012
13 July 2012

Russia: End ‘smear campaign’ against NGOs

The Russian authorities must overturn a draft bill which severely restricts the independence of all non-governmental organisations, Amnesty International said as the Russian parliament approved the bill in the third hearing.

If signed off by President Putin – expected to be a formality - the law, will place a significant financial and administrative burden on Russian NGOs (Non-government organisations) receiving funding from overseas when it comes into force in four months.

Failure to register as organizations “ performing the functions of foreign agents” could result in fines of up to 300,000 rubles (£6,000; \$9,000) or even a prison sentence of up to two years.

“This bill will stifle civil society development in Russia and is likely to be used to silence critical voices who often still depend on external funding. Already NGOs operating in the Russian Federation have to wade through many layers of bureaucracy to carry out their work” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“The authorities have failed to demonstrate the necessity of these measures. This bill appears to have no other purpose than to set hurdles for many of the leading NGOs critical of the government and to make it even more difficult for them to operate in Russia. It should be repealed immediately.”

The words “foreign agent” – inostrannyi agent – carries negative connotations in Russian, suggesting spying.

The Kremlin says that measures are needed to protect Russia from outside attempts to influence internal politics. The authors of the bill argue it will provide transparency and “adequate public control” over foreign-funded NGOs involved in political activities in Russia.

However, all NGOs working in Russia are already subject to stringent regulations. They are required to report to the authorities on their activities and make such information available to others on request, as well as submit detailed financial reports.

The relevant state authorities have for some time had substantive powers to conduct financial and other inspections, as well as other checks, on the Russian and foreign NGOs working in the Russian Federation.

“The fact that this bill passed so quickly before parliament shows that the Russian authorities clearly are intent on reducing democratic space in the country,” said Dalhuisen.

“By doing so, they are threatening the right to freedom of association, guaranteed under international law to which Russia is signatory.”

NGOs in Russia provide vital public services in a wide range of areas such as human rights, education,

social support and environmental activism. Civil society activism has grown very significantly in Russia since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

With domestic sources of funding to civil society activities sparse and unstable, and a significant portion of it provided by the government, selectively and overwhelmingly to loyal or "non-political" NGOs, foreign funding plays a vital role as a lifeline for many civil society organizations, big and small.

Many of these NGOs deliver key services to the Russian public and are indispensable in safeguarding human rights in Russia.

“Many will be forced to choose between accepting foreign funding and being subject to these oppressive new regulations, or foregoing the funding and risking their very existence,” said Dalhuisen.

It is the second time in Russia’s recent history that independent civil society has come under attack from the authorities, both instances occurring under Vladimir Putin’s leadership.

In January 2006, he signed into law changes which imposed additional reporting requirements and restrictions upon NGOs in Russia. These changes gave the authorities increased powers of scrutiny of the funding and activities of NGOs in Russia.

The law was widely criticized by Amnesty International and other rights groups as unduly burdensome, diverting resources from programmes, making key provisions which lacked a precise legal definition and could be applied arbitrarily, and introducing disproportionately harsh sanctions.

The regulations were relaxed under Dmitry Medvedev who succeeded Vladimir Putin as President in 2008 but the legislative changes currently proposed are even more restrictive than those initially introduced in 2006.