



Black November: A New Wave of Attacks on Russian Civil Society

Statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum finds the new package of bills submitted to the Russian State Duma in November 2020 alarming. There is no doubt that these initiatives represent yet another coordinated attack on Russian civil society. Now the state is targeting not only non-governmental organisations as such but also individuals, representation offices of international organisations, educators and, potentially, commercial companies.

Many proposals are connected with the so-called "foreign agents" legislation¹. On 8 December 2020, the bill No. 1057914-7² has passed the first reading at the Russian Parliament. The bill introduces the notion of a "natural person – foreign agent" and makes possible the persecution of Russian citizens, also those who have been working or connected with an NGO – "foreign agent". Inclusion of commercial companies in the list has been postponed 'for the future', as a Deputy Minister of Justice mentioned³.

The citizens involved in the broadly interpreted "political activities" in favour of a foreign state or its representatives and receiving any support from the former – be it in the form of money, property or organisational and methodological assistance – would be obliged to register and regularly report to the Ministry of Justice on their projects and programmes, as well as funds received from abroad and related expenditures. What is more, natural persons – "foreign agents" would need to mention their status in every publication and in every "political" statement, while media would be obliged to mark such citizens in their publications accordingly. In case of non-compliance with the new regulation, the perpetrators would get significant fines.

Another bill being considered (No. 1052523-7)⁴ prescribes that NGOs – "foreign agents" must coordinate their events and programmes with the Ministry of Justice, which has the right to prohibit them. In case of non-compliance with this prohibition, the respective NGO would be

¹ See related statements by the Board/ Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum – dated [10 October 2012](#), [10 June 2014](#) and [20 January 2015](#)

² See <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1057914-7> (in Russian)

³ See www.interfax.ru/russia/739736 (in Russian). It is worth remembering that quite a few NGOs re-registered as commercial entities after their nonprofit entity had been declared a "foreign agent". Subsequently, this suggested measure would be primarily targeting, once again, civil society organisations.

⁴ See <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1052523-7> (in Russian)

dissolved. Branches of foreign organisations might be dissolved on the same grounds as well. The law also extends the concept of foreign sources prohibiting the registration of structural divisions of foreign NGOs in dwellings and introduces an additional basis for extraordinary inspections.

Two other bills (No. 1057230-7⁵ and No. 1057895-7⁶) are aimed at strengthening control over events and extracurricular educational activities.

The changes to the Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” would allow for the state the regulation of extracurricular educational activities – similarly to the case of “political activities”. Virtually, any transfer of knowledge, skills or experience might fall under this notion. The authors of the bill also suggest prohibiting the spread of “untrustworthy information” on historical events, as well as cultural and religious traditions of the peoples of Russia. Once again, the definition of “untrustworthy information” remains unclear.

Amendments to the Law “On Assemblies, Meetings, Demonstrations, Marches and Picketing” would demand from the organisers to inform the authorities not only on the place, the time, the goal and the format of the public event but also on the bank account where funds for the action are being collected. Donors, both citizens and organisations, would be obliged to fill in their full bank account information, citizenship and address. Furthermore, authorities would be allowed to change the time, the place and the date of the public event, in case the threat of a terrorist attack is assumed.

Since 2012, when the “foreign agents” law was introduced, hundreds of organisations dealing with human rights and social issues in different Russian regions, including members and supporters of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, were labelled in that way; dozens of organisations have been forced to close down, which resulted in the denial of important and much needed services to citizens. These days we are experiencing a new wave of inspections in the offices of NGOs e.g. those dealing with preventive measures and assistance to people with HIV/ AIDS.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum considers this package of new bills a further attack on civil society and independent NGOs in Russia and demands the withdrawal of the entire legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”⁷. We call on Tatiana Moskalkova, Russian Commissioner for Human Rights, to protect the rights of NGOs and Russian citizens.

We welcome the statement by Dunja Mijatović⁸, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, who has spoken out in support of NGOs and activists. The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum also appeals to international institutions, including the Council of Europe and the European Union, as well as national governments of the EU member states, to issue

⁵ See <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1057230-7>

⁶ See <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/1057895-7>

⁷ See related statements by the Board/ Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum – dated [5 June 2015](#), [19 March 2018](#) and [26 November 2019](#)

⁸ See www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-for-human-rights-calls-on-the-state-duma-to-refrain-from-adopting-legislation-which-violates-the-rights-of-ngos-and-civil-society-activis

official statements on the cause and demand that the Russian counterparts observe their international obligations.

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The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum was established in 2011 by non-governmental organisations as a permanent common platform. At the moment, 184 NGOs from Russia, the European Union and the United Kingdom are members or supporters of the Forum. It aims at development of cooperation of civil society organisations from Russia and EU and greater participation of NGOs in the EU-Russia dialogue. The Forum has been actively involved, inter alia, in the questions of facilitation of visa regime, development of civic participation, protection of the environment and human rights, dealing with history and civic education.

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