Resolution on the Russian 'foreign agents' Law

2019/2982(RSP) - 19/12/2019 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the Russian ‘foreign agents’ law.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled as a joint resolution by the EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and ECR groups.

In July 2012, Russia adopted a law on ‘foreign agents’ requiring Russian NGOs to register with the Russian Ministry of Justice as ‘organisations performing the functions of foreign agents’ if they receive foreign funding and engage in activities vaguely described as ‘political activities’. In June 2014, the law was amended to allow the Ministry of Justice to register NGOs as ‘foreign agents’ on its own initiative. In November 2017, the scope of the law was extended to impose the use of the ‘foreign agents’ label on any foreign media directly or indirectly receiving foreign funding. The latest amendments to the law on ‘foreign agents’, which extend the status of ‘foreign agents’ to include private persons, including bloggers and independent journalists, were signed into law on 2 December 2019 by President Vladimir Putin.

The law imposes specific requirements for registration, accounting, and labelling of publications, and makes non-compliance a criminal offence, including the possibility of sanctions with heavy administrative fines or imprisonment of up to two years.

Legislative restrictions and targeted prosecutions under the law on foreign agents in Russia have taken on more repressive forms in recent months. The law on ‘foreign agents’ is part of a broader campaign to stifle dissent, opposition, and civil society across Russia.

Repealing the ‘foreign agents’ law

Parliament strongly opposes the Russian authorities’ methods of using the power of the state to suppress freedom of expression and speech and thereby instil fear in society and called on the Russian authorities to support the impartiality of media channels and to improve the safety and working environment of journalists in Russia, including by advancing their professional skills by making use of existing international programmes.

Parliament called on the Russian authorities to immediately repeal the law on ‘foreign agents’ and to bring the existing legislation into line with Russia’s constitution and its obligations under international law. Russia should stop deliberately creating an atmosphere that is hostile to civil society.

Members considered that this law and the excessive use of fines and settlements against the media, human rights organisations and civil society to be deliberately aimed at forcing them to focus their resources on paying fines and judicial defence, and thus to limit freedom of expression.

They called on the Russian authorities to establish a framework for activities of NGOs that is clear, coherent and consistent and is in line with European and international standards, in particular by using clear definitions, by avoiding the use of stigmatising language such as ‘foreign agents’ or discriminatory legal provisions related to sources of funding, and by preventing the criminal prosecution of NGOs, media and bloggers or of individual persons carrying out activities for NGOs or media.

The EU is encouraged to:

- continue to closely monitor the human rights situation in the Russian Federation and to continue monitoring court cases involving civil society organisations and activists;
- raise the matter of the law on ‘foreign agents’ in the institutions of the Council of Europe, primarily in the Committee of Ministers and in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE);
- continuously call on Russia to repeal or amend all laws incompatible with international standards;

The VP/HR is called on to:

- draw up a new and comprehensive EU-Russia strategy aimed at strengthening peace and stability;
- use every possibility to support civil society that promotes democratic values, rule of law, fundamental freedoms and human rights in Russia and to strengthen people-to-people contacts with the citizens of Russia;
- raise concerns about the law on ‘foreign agents’ in their contacts, meetings and communications with Russian representatives, including at the highest levels, and asks them to report back to Parliament on their exchanges with the Russian authorities.