On 3 July 2018, the Information and Communication Committee of the State Duma approved amendments to a bill that would allow the authorities to label individual journalists as “foreign agents”, if they work for media outlets the Ministry of Justice designated as “foreign agents”. The draft legislation would require those individuals to go through annual audits, submit reports on their activities, and put a “foreign agent' label on all produced content. According to the head of Duma's Information and Communication Committee, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prosecutor General's Office would be responsible for given the status of ‘foreign agents' to individual journalists. According to media reports, the new law will allow the authorities to label journalists and bloggers as “foreign agents” and give the power to block websites or other media without a court ruling.

This law follows the amendments enacted in November 2017, that empowered the Ministry of Justice to designate media outlets that are based or funded from outside Russia as “foreign agents”. In December 2017, the Ministry of Justice declared Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and several affiliated news services as foreign agents. Media watchdogs called on Russian authorities to refrain from labelling individual journalists as foreign agents.

On 16 December 2019, President Vladimir Putin signed into law an amendment to the Code of Administrative Offences, which sets out penalties for journalists labelled “foreign agents”. It will allow journalists to be fined up to €1,430 or to be jailed for fifteen days in case of relapse.

Statement by IFJ: "Russia introduces large fines for journalists deemed foreign agents."
On 21 November 2019, the State Duma adopted the bill to extend the status of “foreign agents” to private persons: 311 MPs out of 315 voted in support of the initiative, no one voted against, four abstained. The adopted bill would allow the Ministries of Justice and of Foreign Affairs to also label individuals who disseminate information to an unspecified number of persons and receive funding from abroad as “foreign agents”. This would cover bloggers and freelance journalists who receive grants, salaries, or payment for specific pieces of work from any foreign source. They would be required to register with the Ministry of Justice, and those living abroad would, in order to publish in the Russian Federation, have to register under a legal entity in the Russian Federation. All information published by the “foreign agent” blogger or journalist would have to be marked with the “foreign agent” label. The Russian Union of Journalists (RUJ) will closely monitor the implementation of the law to ensure that its norms are not interpreted arbitrarily. According to Andrei Jvirblis, acting secretary of the Russian Journalists’ and Media Workers’ Union (JMWU), “the extremely vague nature of its formulations is obviously intended for its selective application. This suggests that the new law principally targets journalists unpleasant for the authorities.”

Article 19 joint statement: "Russia: ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill threatens journalists"

Article by RFE/RL: "Russian Duma Approves 'Foreign Agents' Bill That Threatens Journalists With Label"

Article published by Novaya Gazeta: "Расслабляться нельзя даже лауреатам Нобелевской премии"

Statement by the Union of Russia journalists (RUJ): "Союз журналистов будет контролировать каждый случай наделения физлиц статусом иноагента"

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Report by PEN International “Russia’s Strident Stifling of Free Speech 2012-2018”
- CPJ statement: "Russian Duma committee OKs legislation to label individual journalists ‘foreign agents’"
- EFJ statement: "Russia passes new law to label individual journalists as foreign agents"

FOLLOW-UPS

OSCE 04 Dec 2019 | OSCE Representative Désir concerned by enactment of law broadening “foreign agent” status to individuals.
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights called on the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation to refrain from adopting the draft law currently under examination that would significantly extend the definition and scope of a “foreign agent”.

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media urges Russian authorities to refrain from broadening “foreign agents” status to individuals.