[RU] Scope of “Foreign Agents” Law expanded as first journalists labelled as “foreign agents”

IRIS 2021-2:1/34

Andrei Richter
Comenius University (Bratislava)

A new set of amendments further expanding the scope of the Russian Federation’s Federal Statute of 2012 entitled “On amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation with regard to regulating the activities of non-commercial organisations acting as foreign agents”, commonly known as the “Foreign Agents” Statute (see IRIS Extra 2020), was adopted by the State Duma on 23 December and signed by the President on 30 December 2020. It entered into force on the same day.

It now allows for this label to be applied to ordinary citizens, as well as to public associations (movements) that need no registration as legal entities, who are involved in politics (broadly defined) in Russia and who receive, or intend to receive, material and/or financial means that originate from other countries. From now on, they fall under the regulation of the “Foreign Agents” Statute, including its requirements on establishing a legal entity and frequent reporting on its activity.

Such associations are to be included by the Ministry of Justice in the Register of unregistered non-commercial organisations that perform the functions of a foreign agent, while citizens shall be entered in the List of citizens that perform these functions. The exceptions to the registration of citizens as foreign agents include foreign diplomats and “foreign journalists, accredited in the Russian Federation, including those already recognised as individuals – media outlets that perform the functions of a foreign agent in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation on the mass media.”

In particular, the amendments to Article 4 (“Inadmissibility of abuse of freedom of the media”) of the 1991 Statute “On the Mass Media” introduce a norm that bans the dissemination in the mass media and online of information about such associations and citizens, as well as their materials, without relevant markings.

Article 330(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation on malicious evasion of submitting necessary papers to be registered as a “foreign agent” was amended on 23 December 2020 by a separate Federal Statute to take account of the changes made and to increase the maximum punishment for this criminal offence from two to five years’ imprisonment. This amendment enters into force

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

on 1 March 2021.

Moreover, on 25 December 2020, the State Duma adopted, at first reading, several additions to the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences that provide for fines, on average of up to RUB 50 000 (about EUR 550) for citizens, and up to RUB 500 000 for associations, with or without confiscation of the material objects used, for violations of the established procedures.

Soon before its entry into force, on 28 December 2020, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) of the Russian Federation published a press release wherein it announced five new entries to the "register of foreign mass media that perform the functions of a foreign agent" and it also published their names on its official website. They are all Russian citizens, including two journalists from Radio Liberty and the editor of *Pskovskaya guberniya online* (Псковская губерния online), a web resource from the town of Pskov. Their activity shall now be regulated by the "Foreign Agents" Law (see IRIS Extra 2020).

Earlier, on 21 December 2020, the MoJ entered in the Register a Czech News Agency, Medium-Orient, that publishes news from the Caucasus and is financed by the Open Society Institute.

Federal Statute "On amendments to certain legal acts of the Russian Federation as to establishing additional measures of counteraction of threats to national security"

О внесении изменения в статью 330-1 Уголовного кодекса Российской Федерации

http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202012300043?index=0&rangeSize=1

Federal Statute "On amendments to Article 330(1) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation"

Реестр иностранных средств массовой информации, выполняющих функции иностранного агента

https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7755/

The Register of foreign mass media that perform the functions of a foreign agent as amended on 28 December 2020

Пресс-релизы Министерства юстиции от 21 декабря 2020 года

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

Press releases of the Ministry of Justice of 21 December 2020

https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/events/48278/

Пресс-релизы Министерства юстиции от 28 декабря 2020 года

https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/events/48291/

Press releases of the Ministry of Justice of 28 December 2020

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026