Kremlin prepares for mass repression

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Russian President Vladimir Putin signed legislation last Thursday that dramatically increases the repressive power of the state. The law allows the government to label virtually any organization or individual a "foreign agent" on the grounds that they receive support from, or are even just influenced by, outside forces deemed hostile to Moscow.

The law "On control over the activities of people under foreign influence," which will take effect on December 1, states that any organization, whether constituted as a legal entity or not, as well as any person, whether a Russian citizen or not, may be considered a "foreign agent" if they receive financing, property, organizational-methodological support, scientific or technical advice or "other assistance" from any foreign state, foreign organization, foreign "structure," foreign person, or "legal Russian entity or citizen" who are themselves viewed as being aided from the outside.

The "foreign agent" label applies when these people or entities are engaged in "political activity in Russia," the "purposeful collection of information in the areas of military, military-technical activities of the Russian Federation" or "the dissemination of messages and materials to an unlimited audience."

The extremely broad definitions mean that anyone and any organization which the Russian state decides to target can fall victim to the "foreign agent" law. Whether it be a young person who posts an article published by the Associated Press on her social media, a worker who issues a public call for a demonstration in solidarity with the oppressed people of Sri Lanka, or a teacher who speaks with students about the writings of German revolutionary Karl Marx, all can be accused. Were it not for the exceptions granted to religious organizations, political parties, employer and industry associations, chambers of commerce, the institutions of the Russian state, Russian state companies and the people under the direction of the latter two, Vladimir Putin himself might be a "foreign agent."

"Foreign agents" must identify themselves as such to the state and label any public materials they release as those of a "foreign agent." They cannot work at any level of federal, municipal or local government or invest in any "strategic enterprise." They cannot work in the educational system, have any connection to anything having to do with the education of minors or be involved in the production of information for minors. They cannot organize public events, serve on election commissions or make donations to elections or political parties. They cannot receive any form of state financial support. They cannot be involved in the "procurement of goods, work and services" to meet state and municipal needs—in other words, they are cut out of all government contracts. They cannot be involved with infrastructure tied to information systems and security. They cannot participate in state environmental reviews.

Russian workers—teachers, doctors, civil servants, postal employees, garbage collectors, municipal workers and on and on—will find themselves immediately out of work and worse, if they are deemed "foreign agents." Violations of the law can result in administrative or criminal charges or "other liability," which will be imposed "in accordance with the established procedure," says the website of the State Duma, Russia's parliament. What fate awaits people is unclear.

The Ministry of Justice, whose head is appointed by the Russian president, will maintain and publish a list of "foreign agents" and "individuals affiliated with them"—in short, the list will metastasize. It will become a blacklist.

Removal of the "foreign agent" designation is only possible at the whim of the state. For non-profit organizations to be relieved of the label, they must

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prove they are no longer receiving money from foreign sources, halt all political activity or both. There is no clear definition for either of these requirements. For individuals to get off, they must fill out on an application and "attach documents confirming the termination of the circumstances that served as the basis for inclusion in the register." In short, they must denounce themselves or provide proof that they have stopped doing something that they were never doing in the first place.

In a country in which millions were rounded up, imprisoned, and killed during the Stalinist Great Terror, this law has vast and sinister implications. During the 1930s, the charge of "counter-revolutionary Trotskyist activity," a death sentence for tens of thousands, was connected to accusations of treasonous collaboration with foreign states. The violent and reactionary nationalism of the Soviet bureaucracy is finding modern expression in today's oligarchy, which emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

The current "foreign agents" law was preceded in March by legislation outlawing anti-war demonstrations and statements, with nearly 200 people, according to official records, now having been charged with various offenses such as the spreading of "false facts" about the war or negative comments about the Russian military. Penalties include fines and prison time, with the most severe punishments resulting in many years behind bars. An artist in Yekaterinburg was sentenced on Tuesday to two weeks confinement in a psychiatric ward for posting anti-war stickers around the city. Numerous media outlets have been shut down and access to Twitter, Facebook and other global social media platforms ended.

The parliament is preparing a new labor code that will give the state the power to "establish the legal conditions of labor relations in individual organizations," including determining "the conditions of employment at work outside of established hours, at night, on weekends and holidays, and the provision of paid annual leave." In short, the Russian working class is meant to labor at the order of the state under the terms that it establishes. Those who dare to strike will be confronted with the full repressive powers of the state.

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