



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Russian “Foreign Agent” Law

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Gary Robbins
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 19, 2014

The United States has previously noted our deep concern with legislation in the Russian Federation requiring non-governmental organizations receiving donations from external sources and engaged in unclearly defined “political activities” to register as “foreign agents.” Over the past two years, Russian authorities have used this “foreign agents” law to limit work by independent groups on a wide spectrum of issues. Instances of so-called “political activity” affected by this law have included submitting a report on police abuses to the UN Committee Against Torture, advocating for transparency in the Russian electoral process, hosting a U.S. diplomat at a roundtable discussion on the future of U.S.-Russian relations, and shaping public opinion on state policies by publishing materials which are available to a wide audience on the Internet. All of these activities are efforts by Russian citizens and organizations to encourage their government to implement existing treaty obligations and OSCE commitments on human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Our concern with this law deepened when, on June 4, President Putin signed an amendment giving power to the Ministry of Justice to unilaterally designate NGOs as “foreign agents,” bypassing any judicial process. Within days of this amendment being signed, five organizations were placed on this list of “foreign agents.” These include two arms of the Russian election monitoring organization Golos, the Center for Social Policies and Gender Studies in Saratov, the Kostroma Center for the Support of Civic Initiatives, and the human rights group Women of the Don. While there is technically a process for NGOs to appeal this designation, we have grave doubts about the prospect for an unbiased judicial review made by the Ministry of Justice under the amended law. We note that complaints are pending before the Venice Commission and the European Court of Human Rights concerning this law’s incompatibility with the right to freedom of association.

In Astana in 2010, all OSCE participating States, including the Russian Federation, reaffirmed “the important role played by civil society and free media in helping us to ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy, including free and fair elections, and the rule of law.” We call on Russia to implement these commitments fully.

All of us also reaffirmed in Astana that human rights are not solely a domestic issue, but a matter of “direct and legitimate” interest to all participating States. The United States is committed to supporting the development of civil society and respect for fundamental freedoms around the world, which we consider essential to the free flow of ideas necessary for all countries to realize their peoples' full potential. We will continue to monitor and comment upon the situation as it develops.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.