



**Statement of the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference on
the New Russian Legislation that Expands the “Foreign Agents” concept to physical persons**

The 2019 OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference condemns this week’s new Russian legislation that expands the “foreign agents” concept to physical persons.

Russia’s legislation on “foreign agents” already for a number of years has covered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets that receive any amount of funding from foreign sources. It requires them to indicate their ‘foreign agent’ status in all their publications, creates onerous reporting requirements and introduces restrictions on the activities they may undertake. Criminal and administrative sanctions for non-compliance include fines of up to 500,000 rubles or imprisonment of up to two years. Heavy fines have been imposed on dozens of Russian NGOs for failure to follow the requirements of the law, undermining their financial sustainability and potentially leading to their bankruptcy. Implementation of the legislation has demonstrated that it is impossible to successfully appeal inclusion in the “foreign agent” list and the imposition of fines.

The new expansion of the legislation allows authorities to require all material published by an individual who has received money from abroad or from a Russian organisation that has received money from abroad to be labelled as having been distributed by a “foreign agent”. No proof of connection between the money received and the publication are necessary for the inclusion of these persons in the list of “foreign agents”. Also, any individual, including Russian citizens living abroad, who distributes materials of foreign media who have been recognised earlier as “foreign agent media”, including by reposting their materials in social networks, could him- or herself be labelled a “foreign agent media” and would be obliged to register an organisation in Russia and distribute any materials only through this new organisation.

While almost anyone can be affected by the new repressive legislation, independent journalists, bloggers and NGO activists face the highest risk of persecution. The new legislation clearly aims at further isolating the Russian public from the world, suppressing access to and distribution of information, and stifling online debate. It will have a strong chilling effect and lead to self-censorship. This expansion comes on top of a long series of repressive steps by the Russian government that have continuously widened the gap with Russia’s obligations under international human rights law, including the right to fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly and association, enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. It violates letter and spirit of the Helsinki agreements, the origin of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe that included a commitment to stimulate human contacts and free flow of information. The Russian government should end its continued efforts to suppress access to and distribution of information and silence independent journalism and activism in the country.

Conference participants express their determination to continue supporting and collaborating with all those in Russia defending and exercising the right to free expression and free production and distribution of information.