

Russia's 'Undesirable Organizations' Law No Threat to Democracy – Kremlin

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The Kremlin on Wednesday defended a move to bar a U.S.-funded pro-democracy group from Russia after it was declared "undesirable," saying Russians could still get access to such organizations.

Russian prosecutors branded the National Endowment for Democracy, funded largely by U.S. Congress, "undesirable" on Tuesday under a law Moscow says boosts security but critics say stifles civil society under President Vladimir Putin.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told a conference call: "It would be wrong to say that citizens' rights are violated by banning this or that organization. Banning the activities of one or more organizations won't mean that citizens' access to democracy groups is limited."

Putin, at loggerheads with the West over Ukraine, has said he will not allow rights groups to be used to foment unrest in Russia. In 2012, Russia obliged groups that get foreign funding and engage in "political activity" to register as "foreign agents," a term widely seen as derogatory.

The move to bar NED is the first under legislation on "undesirable" groups which Kremlin critics say further tightens the screws on non-governmental organizations in Russia.

"The law on undesirable organizations is the latest in a series of highly restrictive laws that limit the freedom of Russian citizens," NED said in a statement on its website.

"This law, as well as its predecessors, contravenes Russia's own constitution as well as numerous international laws and treaties. The true intent of these laws is to intimidate and isolate Russian citizens."

Russian prosecutors said NED handed out \$5.2 million to groups in Russia in 2013-14 and that it would outlawed after Russia's Justice Ministry puts it on a blacklist. It was not clear when that might happen.

The prosecutors said NED had used the groups it sponsored to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Russian election results, to organize "political actions" to influence the decisions of state authorities and discredit the armed forces.

Another U.S. rights group, the MacArthur Foundation, said last week it was closing its Moscow office after it was placed on a list of "undesirable" NGOs by the upper house of parliament.

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