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Rights Groups Undergo Surprise Checks

By Alexey Eremenko

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Leading human rights groups said Tuesday that prosecutors have initiated a hasty series of in-depth checks of their papers ahead of October elections.

The checks, ordered by Moscow prosecutors, are targeting Moscow Helsinki Group; Golos, an independent elections watchdog; the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights; and the Russian branch of Transparency International, among others.

The prosecutors' requests, mostly sent out late Monday and Tuesday, ask the groups to provide organizational and financial documents as well as other paperwork.

Some organizations have refused to comply, citing errors in the requests, one of which failed to properly spell the name of Transparency International, Interfax reported. But most groups presented what paperwork they could collect on short notice.

Golos deputy head Grigory Melkonyants said the Basmanny District Prosecutor's Office on Monday asked for the papers to be presented by midday. District prosecutors planned to

forward the papers to the City Prosecutor's Office, he said.

“This was not exactly a sensible deadline, but we sent them everything that was required,” Melkonyants told The Moscow Times.

Daniil Meshcheryakov of the Moscow Helsinki Group said its request arrived by fax at 1:30 a.m. Tuesday.

“At 11 a.m., our accountant took the papers we managed to prepare to the prosecutors, who asked for an explanation about why the list of documents was incomplete, inquired about her role in our organization and demanded to have the remaining paperwork provided by tomorrow,” he said Tuesday.

The checks are supposed to examine how amendments to legislation on nongovernmental organizations passed in recent years are being implemented, the City Prosecutor's Office said on its web site Tuesday. A spokesman refused to elaborate when reached by telephone.

A 2005 law stepped up state control over nongovernmental organizations and increased the amount of bureaucratic red tape that they have to deal with. The Kremlin-backed bill was criticized by both the United States and the European Union.

Rights defenders were unconvinced by prosecutors' explanations Tuesday, calling them an excuse for a crackdown. But they could not say what exactly had prompted the checks.

“All this is a massive assault on all nongovernmental organizations — all those that get foreign financing,” Golos head Lilia Shibanova said, Interfax reported.

“The request looks bizarre in this form. Everything could be done on a voluntary basis,” Melkonyants said.

Regional elections will be held in hundreds of locales next month.

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