The Moscow Times
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German NGOs Need Work Permits

By Nikolaus von Twickel

October 10, 2012



German nongovernmental organizations operating in Russia are facing bureaucratic troubles because their foreign staff is now required to obtain work permits.

In 2006, Germany reached an agreement with Russia to allow the heads of NGOs to perform their duties in the country without a work permit.

The NGOs became aware of the new permit requirement only when some of them applied for new visas this summer, said Jens Siegert, who heads the Moscow office of the Bъll Foundation, a German pro-democracy group.

Some German NGO workers may be forced to leave the country because they won't get work permits before their current visas expire, said Siegert, whose own visa expires in December.

Work permits for foreigners from outside the Commonwealth of Independent States typically take three months to obtain from the Federal Migration Service.

Another NGO director who might have to leave is Marcus Ehm of the Hanns-Seidel Foundation, Siegert said.

Ehm was on an official visit to Germany this week, and a spokesman for the Bavaria-based organization said by telephone from Munich that he would not comment on the issue.

The German Embassy also declined to comment. A spokeswoman merely said, "Talks are ongoing with relevant authorities."

The heads of other foreign NGOs have been required to obtain work permits since 2006. At that time, the Kremlin was imposing stricter rules for foreign NGOs, and Berlin insisted that an exception be made.

The agreement stipulated that German nationals who head their NGO's office can get their work visas without work permits. German NGOs are still not required to obtain work permit quotas.

In Moscow, there are currently six German NGOs affiliated with political parties.

The Konrad-Adenauer Foundation belongs to Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats, while the Hanns-Seidel Foundation is from her Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union.

The Free Democrats run the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, while the Social Democrats have the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The BЂll foundation belongs to the Green party, and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is run by the Left Party.

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