

NGOs Slam Volunteer Bill

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Prominent nongovernmental organizations said Monday that a new bill on volunteerism would stifle their work through increased bureaucracy and unnecessary regulation.

At a roundtable organized by the Civic Initiatives Committee, a think tank headed by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, NGOs said it would be senseless to adopt legislation regulating their work since it would deter people from taking part in charitable projects.

"Excessive regulation doesn't help anyone. Becoming a volunteer is a personal decision, but in the Federation Council bill, the government is named as the main organizer of volunteer activity," said Yelena Alshanskaya, director of the Volunteers Helping Orphans charity.

The bill drafted by the upper house of parliament would create a federal register of volunteer workers, issue registered volunteers with identity cards and task a federal body with setting government policy on volunteers. The State Duma is expected to hear the bill in a first reading later this month.

The stated aim of the bill is to provide a legal basis for volunteer work in Russia, stimulate the development of local volunteer groups and publicize large-scale, state-run programs.

The idea to regulate volunteers gained traction last summer after local authorities in the southern town of Krymsk butted heads with humanitarian workers who came to assist in the aftermath of devastating flooding.

Senators have stressed that the bill is not aimed at clamping down on the activities of volunteer groups and that volunteers will not be forced to register with the government to work on charitable projects. They also say foreigners will still be allowed to undertake volunteer work in Russia.

But NGOs are convinced that the legislation is not necessary and are treating senators' proposals with suspicion.

"Our position is that the bill isn't needed," said Grigory Kuksin, head of Greenpeace Russia's firefighting program. "We believe that, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' The current legislation allows us to do our work."

Kuksin said that prior attempts at regulating volunteer workers, such as a 2011 law on volunteer firefighters passed after the 2010 wildfires in western Russia, were hastily passed and ignored recommendations from nongovernmental groups.

Yelena Kirichuk, a psychologist with the Kaliningrad region charity "I Believe in a Miracle," which helps critically ill children, said the bill would lead to a reduction in the number of quality volunteers, the discontinuation of important social programs and a loss of private investment in the charity sector. She also said that senators' idea of providing volunteers with financial incentives was "absurd."

Natalya Starinova, a lawyer with the Russian Orthodox Church's charity and social services department, said the ideology behind the bill was fundamentally flawed.

Other speakers said the bill would provoke an upsurge in corruption at the federal body overseeing volunteer groups and that it represented a violation of the rights of volunteers.

"Any law would be damaging at present. At the very most, we need some small amendments [to current legislation]," said Yelena Topoleva, head of the Public Chamber's social policy commission.

"I think it's wrong that volunteers could be used as a sort of resource."

Summing up Monday's discussion, which was attended by representatives from 34 NGOs, Kudrin said his Civic Initiatives Committee would form an expert group that would provide an independent assessment of the bill.

Kudrin, who has worked for more than a decade with Northern Crown, a charitable foundation that provides medical care, psychological support and teaching to Russian orphans, said the bill seemed "inappropriate."

Northern Crown was founded in 2000 by Kudrin's wife, Irina Kudrina.

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