

Hundreds of NGOs Checked for Foreign Agents, Extremism

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Russia's Prosecutor General's Office

Acting on instructions from the Prosecutor General's Office, government inspectors in at least nine Russian regions have conducted hundreds of unannounced checks on non-governmental organizations, including well-known human rights, environment and religious groups.

The checks are designed to catch organizations that receive foreign funding and are involved in "political activities" but have failed to register as "foreign agents," as required by a law passed last year that was derided by rights activists and widely boycotted, said Pavel Chikov, head of the Agora human rights association and a member of the presidential human rights council.

A Penza-based activist said investigators were also searching for "extremism," citing a two-page document that he uploaded to [Facebook](#) and said were part of the prosecutor office's orders.

Chikov said the inspections also constituted a scare campaign against independent groups that are "active, well-known and inconvenient" for the government.

After tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Moscow to demand free elections beginning in December 2011, officials accused some NGOs that receive foreign funding and are seen as opposition-leaning of being foreign puppets bent on destabilizing Russia.

Vote monitor Golos, one of the groups often accused of being a foreign agent, saw its Samara office inspected on Monday, the Kommersant daily newspaper reported.

The checks would also seem to be part of a rightward tack by President Vladimir Putin, who has courted the Russian Orthodox Church and other conservative groups in recent months as a counterbalance to the protest movement, analysts have said.

Checks have taken place in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the Samara, Rostov, Krasnodar, Perm, Penza and Saratov regions, and the Chuvashia republic, Russian media reported. At least 200 organizations had been checked, Chikov said, telling Gazeta.ru that the total could be near 1,000. "We're getting more reports by the day," he said by telephone on Tuesday.

Responding to "numerous" appeals from non-governmental groups, the presidential human rights council's NGO commission held a special meeting to discuss the issue on Tuesday afternoon. The results of the meeting, which could have included a statement or an official request, were not made public as of Tuesday evening.

Inspectors from the Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Consumer Protection Service, the Emergency Situations Ministry, and the Federal Security Service — a successor to the Soviet KGB — and other agencies have participated in the inspections, Chikov and several groups said.

The prosecutor's office said checks for lawbreaking at social, religious and other organizations were being carried out according to the agency's plan for the first six months of this year, [RIA-Novosti](#) reported Tuesday, citing a government statement.

A Moscow Times reporter seeking additional commentary from the agency was asked three times to call back, and a secretary who answered the fourth call said nobody was around to comment.

On Tuesday, inspectors arrived at the office of the Bellona environmental group in St. Petersburg and the Kennan Institute in Moscow, a division of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a Washington-based think tank partly funded by the U.S. Congress.

The officers who arrived at Bellona searched for "extremist" materials and ordered the organization to provide copies of all internal documents from the past three years by Friday. "It's a gigantic volume of documents," Nikolai Rybakov, the group's executive director, said by telephone.

"They sent officers from Peterhof," a nearby town, "because there aren't enough prosecutors in St. Petersburg's central district," where the group's office is located, Rybakov said.

Inspectors from the Prosecutor General's Office, the Justice Ministry, the Federal Tax Service and the Federal Migration Service were more "polite" when they arrived at the Kennan Institute, where they requested photocopies of internal documents but did not require additional disclosures.

"We gave them the copies, and they left. They didn't rummage through our belongings," Irina Petrova, the institute's administrative director, said by telephone.

Regional prosecutors have been given free reign to determine which organizations to check and how to check them, which explains why some inspections have seemed more draconian than others, Chikov said. The Prosecutor General's Office issued the initial order in late February, he said.

The six officers who showed up unannounced at a Roman Catholic church in the southern city of Novocherkassk on Friday afternoon were especially eager to hear about the parish's foreign funding, church rector Father Alexei said by telephone on Tuesday.

"They all started scribbling away furiously" when the subject came up, he said. "I made it clear that we receive 'voluntary donations from parishioners,' but they rushed ahead and wrote 'financing.' I told them, 'Don't distort the Russian language!'" he said.

"They probably think that Catholics in Russia are aiding terrorists. Maybe they're interested in our secret financing for our nuclear weapons project, I don't know!" he said.

Last year saw the passage of the "foreign agents" law, as well as a measure that broadened the definition of treason to include individuals or groups that pass a state secret to a "foreign government or international, foreign organization."

In October, Russia expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development, an U.S. government grant-giving body that had provided funding for Golos, the Moscow Helsinki Group and other prominent civil society groups, after officials accused it of meddling in Russia's internal affairs.

Father Alexei called the local prosecutor's office to ask why his church had been inspected, but he was told that answer was secret "internal information." Then he asked whether local Russian Orthodox Churches had also been checked. The reply was the same.

"There's never been such a comprehensive check like it," said Valentina Cherevatenko, head of the Union of Women of the Don Region, a Novocherkassk-based group that campaigns for the rights of women and children, which was inspected last week.

Inspectors from various agencies periodically drop by, but never all at once, she said by telephone on Tuesday. Bellona's Rybakov said the last such check took place in 2007.

The sweeps brought back eerie memories of a government crackdown on NGOs that began in 2004, President Vladimir Putin's second term in office. The clampdown was enabled by new laws that included strict registration requirements.

In familiar language, NGOs were accused of attempting to foment a "color revolution" similar to the one that led to the arrival of a pro-Western government in Ukraine in 2004.

The British Council, an NGO that promotes British culture around the world, was suspected of spying and in 2007 ceased its operations outside of Moscow.

Cherevatenko, the women's activist, did not want to even think about whether her organization was now under threat. "Let's not jinx ourselves," she said.

Contact the author at j.earle@imedia.ru

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