The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Prosecutors Raid Memorial Rights Group

By Alexander Winning

March 21, 2013



Prosecutors raided prominent human rights group Memorial on Thursday as part of a check into the group's activities, one of hundreds of raids at non-governmental groups across the country in recent days.

The check at one of the group's offices in central Moscow was temporarily interrupted by NTV reporters, who arrived at the same time and said they were gathering material for an upcoming exposé.

Officials from the Prosecutor General's Office, Interior Ministry, Justice Ministry and Federal Tax Service turned up late Thursday morning at Memorial's office on Ulitsa Karetny Ryad, located near the central Chekhovskaya metro station, the rights group said in an e-mailed statement.

The officials were checking whether Memorial complies with a law obliging foreign-funded non-governmental organizations engaging in "political activities" to register as "foreign agents," according to the statement.

Memorial has said it would boycott the law, adopting a similar stance to rights organizations including Lyudmila Alexeyeva's Moscow Helsinki Group. Justice officials earlier described the legislation as unenforceable.

Thursday's raid on Memorial's office comes the same week that government inspectors conducted unannounced checks at hundreds of NGOs across Russia, citing legislation combating extremism.

Observers have said the raids are part of a scare campaign aimed at intimidating independent organizations critical of the government, and the presidential human rights council on Thursday issued an appeal to Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to halt the raids, which it described as "harassing" law-abiding NGOs.

Memorial head Alexander Cherkasov's phone was switched off throughout the raid, which lasted more than six hours, but former head Oleg Orlov told journalists from the Grani.ru news portal that prosecutors had seized documents relating to Memorial's founders, corporate charter, accounts and sources of funding and that they had requested access to dozens more.

Orlov said the raid would not place Memorial's future work in jeopardy and was aimed at scaring NGOs into "self-censorship." Memorial runs both a human rights group and a research center documenting Soviet political repression.

Anna Karetnikova, an activist with Memorial, said in comments on Twitter that the NTV journalists ran around Memorial's office asking staff, "Do you receive funding from abroad?" before police escorted them out of the building.

The journalists, who were identified as Pyotr Drogovoz and Alexander Belyayev, remained parked on the street outside Memorial's office until the evening as the check continued, she said.

NTV later confirmed that footage filmed by Drogovoz and his colleague would feature in its "Emergency Situation" series. Earlier programs in the same series prompted investigators to open criminal cases against opposition leaders for allegedly orchestrating mass riots.

Pavel Chikov, a member of President Vladimir Putin's human rights council, told The Moscow Times on Monday that prosecutors issued the initial order to check NGOs in late February, days after Putin reminded senior Federal Security Service officers to enforce the new rules governing non-governmental organizations.

"Any direct or indirect interference in our internal affairs, any form of pressure on Russia, on our allies and partners is unacceptable," Putin told FSB officers, sticking to the government line that foreign-funded NGOs were bent on destabilizing Russia.

But even before Putin's speech, Memorial was targeted for being a supposed "foreign agent." On Nov. 21, the day the NGO law came into force, unidentified hooligans painted the words "Foreign Agent. Love U.S.A." under the windows of one of the group's Moscow offices.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/21/prosecutors-raid-memorial-rights-group-a22576