

Amnesty International's Moscow Office Searched

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russian prosecutors and tax police searched the Moscow headquarters of Amnesty International and several other rights groups Monday, continuing a wave of pressure that activists say is part of President Vladimir Putin's attempt to stifle dissent.

Sergei Nikitin, Amnesty's Russia chief, said officials from the Prosecutor General's Office and tax police conducted an unannounced audit of his offices. Nikitin said the officials requested documents from the human rights watchdog that the government already had on file.

They were accompanied by journalists from the state-controlled NTV television station, which has been used by the Kremlin for hatchet jobs against its political foes. Other rights groups were also subject to searches.

Veteran activist Lev Ponomarev's For Human Rights movement was also visited by officials

and an NTV crew on Monday. He wrote a letter to the Moscow prosecutor's office calling the search illegal, since prosecutors provided no evidence that his organization broke the law.

Public Verdict, a well-known human rights law group, was also searched Monday.

Putin has long been suspicious of NGOs, especially those with American funding, which he has accused of being fronts for U.S. meddling in Russian politics.

After he returned to the presidency in May, parliament rubber-stamped a Kremlin-backed law requiring all NGOs that receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," a term many Russians find pejorative.

Russian officials have searched up to 2,000 nongovernmental organizations nationwide in the past month, according to Pavel Chikov, a member of the presidential human rights council.

The searches began after Putin gave a speech urging the Federal Security Service to focus attention on groups receiving foreign funding, which he said were "putting pressure on Russia."

Although the Justice Ministry said it was unenforceable earlier this year, it told Interfax on Monday that the searches were being carried out in line with the foreign agents law.

According to Chikov, however, many organizations have been checked under another, vaguely worded law on "extremism," including by agencies that have nothing to do with enforcing it, like the fire service and the health department.

The U.S. Embassy, Amnesty, the presidential human rights council and Public Verdict have all expressed concern over the wave of searches.

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