

Courts and Prisons the Focus of Human Rights Complaints

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President Vladimir Putin meeting with human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin on March 28.

Unfair court judgments, poor prison conditions and abuse of authority by law enforcement officials were among the main complaints received by Kremlin human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin last year, which he said in an annual report was the "most difficult" for him since taking his post in 2004.

Last year was marked by unprecedented opposition activity for modern Russia, and the state's resulting crackdown, including laws such as those expanding the definition of treason and tightening restrictions on nongovernmental groups, forced Lukin "to deal with flagrant rights violations" without waiting for complaints to come, he said at a news conference Tuesday to present the report.

"One of the main problems I see is passing too many new laws in a short period of time," Lukin said. "Laws can be passed now on any subject: If someone sneezes on the street

and there is a lawmaker next to him, there probably will be a law that will determine the allowed number of decibels for sneezing."

Lukin was referring to a recent Duma initiative stipulating fines for people not officially registered at their current place of residence. "The law requires too much bureaucracy," he said.

Speaking about the recent checks of hundreds of NGOs across the country, Lukin said that they will be carefully examined by his agency and that he asked more than 20 rights organizations, including Memorial and Moscow Helsinki Group, to send him information on how they were checked.

"I met with the president last week and told him I was astonished by the scale and simultaneity of the checks into NGOs," Lukin said. "He said he didn't have enough information on the issue at the time but would try to look into it."

He said another topic of his talks with President Vladimir Putin was planned prison reforms and emphasized that the Federal Prison Service was one of the main targets of complaints last year. Lukin criticized the reforms, saying it was not clear who would be in charge of implementing and funding them.

"To implement them we need to build 400 new prisons, or fundamentally decrease the number of people in prisons, who number around 800,000 at the moment," he said. "That is why at the meeting with Putin I said we needed to start humanizing the existing system. He approved of the idea, so I think it will be realized."

Lukin's annual report says that despite the failure of the state and opposition to communicate, last year's rallies were an important step toward a more democratic society. Lukin said that in general, he was satisfied with the results of last year's protest activity.

"Everyone is concentrated only on one rally," he said, referring to the May 6 demonstration at Bolotnaya Ploshchad that was marked by violent clashes between protesters and police. "But we shouldn't forget that in general, everything was fine with other rallies," he said.

The Investigative Committee has opened criminal investigations in connection with the violence against more than 20 people accused of participating in "riots." Opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov has been charged with organizing riots, which he denies doing, and is under house arrest until August.

Lukin said there have been complaints from several activists, including Udaltsov and his associate Leonid Razvozhayev, who alleged that police kidnapped and tortured him, accusations the authorities deny. Lukin also said that what happened at Bolotnaya Ploshchad could not be qualified as riots.

When asked about his attitude toward the state of political rights in Russia, Lukin said: "There are aspects that I like, there are those that I like less, and there are those that I don't like at all." But he said he would be ready to share his position openly only after his term as human rights ombudsman expires next year.

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