The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why the Kremlin Is Targeting NGOs

By Nikolai Petrov

April 01, 2013

The authorities have initiated an unprecedented campaign against nongovernmental organizations, conducting burdensome inspections of their offices in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Perm, Krasnodar, Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Rostov-on-Don and dozens of other cities. Reports from more than two dozen regions indicate that hundreds of human rights, religious, educational and cultural organizations had been subjected to checks, including both Russian entities and the offices of foreign organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, Alliance Francaise and a number of German foundations.


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In each case, an entire brigade descends on an NGO: representatives of law enforcement agencies, the prosecutor's office, the Justice Ministry, the special police division charged with fighting extremism, the FSB, the Federal Tax Service, the fire safety directorate, the labor directorate and the migration service. Prosecutors demand that the organization produce a large number of documents, sometimes covering as much as the past three years of its activities.

The Prosecutor General's Office initially explained that the inspections were the result of the new law on "foreign agents" that went into force on Nov. 21. However, that law cannot be applied retroactively, and the explanation still does not reveal why investigators are digging so deeply into NGO activities. The authorities later offered the explanation that they are checking NGOs for possible extremist activity.

Almost simultaneously with the growing wave of NGO inspections, the Kremlin website published a decree by President Vladimir Putin allocating more than 2.3 billion rubles ($74 million) in 2013 to nongovernmental organizations that "carry out socially significant projects and participate in the development of civil society." The decree stipulates that contracts should be signed with the NGOs by late April and that the promised money must be allocated by mid-October. However, according to calculations made by the Economic Development Ministry, the nonprofit sector will lose several times more money in 2013 because Western sponsors have been forced out of the country or have left on their own. It is thus inevitable that the number and size of nonprofit groups — and especially those that the Kremlin deems disloyal — will decrease significantly.

The U.S., the European Commission and a number of European states have expressed concern about the frontal assault being waged against NGOs in Russia. A U.S. State Department representative even called the inspections "a type of witch hunt."

What is the Kremlin hoping to accomplish?

The crackdown might be intended to intimidate civil society. Or it might be to collect compromising materials — although any information could only be put to use in the future because it would be impossible for the authorities to quickly study the tons of documents that they have seized. Just the same, a few organizations will probably be selected as scapegoats and punished publicly, most likely those that monitor elections and corruption and that have remained beyond the Kremlin's control.

To wage its campaign, the Kremlin has had to divert law enforcement officers away from their regular task of fighting crime and corruption. In the first use of such a tactic, hundreds of regional investigators were brought to Moscow to crack down on the protest movement, and now hundreds of law enforcement officers have been ordered to focus on the nonprofit sector. Thus, the already inefficient Russian law enforcement system has diverted a significant part of its forces to fighting the terrifying specter of an Orange Revolution or to eradicating practically the last remaining element of society to have retained at least some independence from the Kremlin.

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