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Kremlin's 'Political' NGOs

By Victor Davidoff

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During President Vladimir Putin's annual national televised call-in show on Thursday, he dropped a bombshell with the statement that two "active CIA officers" participated in privatization plans under Anatoly Chubais in the 1990s. This isn't the president's first revelation of foreign plots against Russia. Like all the others, he didn't mention any names or provide any material evidence.

But that doesn't matter. Putin's real message has nothing to do with events of 20 years ago and everything to do with today. His message was heard by a wide range of government agencies, from the Federal Security Services to the Prosecutor General's Office and the Federal Tax Service. For two months, these agencies have been checking nongovernmental organizations, ferreting out the ones that might be called "foreign agents." In this context, agents are not sleeper cells of trained spies, but NGOs that meet two criteria: They receive funding for their projects from foreign sources and are engaged in political activities.

To date, 256 NGOs in 55 regions have been checked, according to the Agora human rights association. In some cities, like Omsk, organizational checks have given way to interrogation

of their employees. The police visited civic activists at home, asking questions about their involvement in oppositional activities and their foreign friends. In Krasnodar, the FSB arrested the director of the grant program of the Southern Regional NGO Resource Center, Professor Mikhail Savva. Although officially he is charged with embezzlement of grant funds received from the local government, the involvement of the FSB indicates the arrest's political underpinning. During the search of Savva's home, all photographs taken abroad were confiscated, as were his daughter's foreign language textbooks.

This all-out search for agents among NGOs has produced its first results. On Wednesday, a Moscow court found that the Golos organization should be registered as a foreign agent. Golos monitors elections, and their exposures of election-rigging has become the Kremlin's painful Achilles heel. This might explain the court's ruling, since Golos does not meet either of the criteria; it is not involved in partisan politics and did not receive any foreign grants since the foreign agent law was passed. But it did win the Andrei Sakharov award in 2012 from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee worth 50,000 euros ($65,000). Although the organization sent the money back, the court apparently deemed this inconsequential.

The prosecutors' broad understanding of "political activity" essentially equates any civic activity with the battle for power. Igor Sazhin, the chairman of the Memorial in Komi, discussed this issue with representatives of the local prosecutor's office and came to a conclusion that "our prosecutors consider any contact with the authorities to be 'politics,'" as he wrote on the LiveJournal blog. "Our charter contains the phrase 'assisting the authorities' and the prosecutors call that 'politics.'"

The climax of this absurd drama was a demand to the Moscow Organization of Aid to Patients with Cystic Fibrosis that it register as foreign agents sen. As the warning from the prosecutor's office makes clear, the organization's goals of "submitting suggestions to government agencies" is considered political activity.

Who gains from this witch hunt? The status of "foreign agent" automatically cuts off most fundraising opportunities for Russia-based NGOs. Who gains from the closure of an organization for people with a serious genetic illness?

One possible answer is Memorial's commentary on recent events: "The ruling elite has been in a panic after demonstrations that began in December 2011 in Moscow and spread throughout the country. The authorities can't believe that these demonstrations reflect a widespread mood of protest in Russian society. Instead the top leaders believe that a fifth column, financed by the enemies of Russia abroad, is guilty."

Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be any group in the country powerful enough to diminish the Cold War mentality of the FSB officers in the Kremlin. Putin categorically refuses to enter a dialog with the opposition.

At the same time, however, the inspections of NGOs stopped for a couple of days when Putin was in Europe at the beginning of April. This gives some hope that if the Western public and politicians join together to defend Russian NGOs, they might save many of them, as well as the lives, health and rights of the people these NGOs serve.

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