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NGO Balks at Ministry Order to Register as 'Foreign Agent'

By The Moscow Times

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Human rights organization Agora has vowed not to bow to pressure to register as a "foreign agent" with the Justice Ministry, despite facing fines and even closure.

The nonprofit organization, based in Kazan, was informed by the Justice Ministry that it was in violation of laws governing NGOs in Russia, namely, receiving funding from abroad and engaging in political activity, Kommersant reported Tuesday.

Agora has been offering legal support to people arrested for participating in street protests in December 2011 and May 6, 2012, but Pavel Chikov, head of the organization, refused to accept the ministry's assertions that the organization was associated with any political movements in Russia.

Prosecutors started mass checks on NGOs in March to determine whether their activities are actually in line with the functions outlined in their statutes.

The law requiring foreign-funded politically active NGOs to register came into force in late 2012. NGOs also have been told that they must submit reports about their activities once every six months, as well as quarterly accounts outlining expenditure of their funds, Interfax reported Tuesday.

All leading human rights organizations have decided to boycott the law, even though failure to register could result in possible closure or a fine of 500,000 rubles ($16,000).

The first organization to be sanctioned for violating the law on NGOs is Golos, which trains election observers. It was fined 300,000 rubles ($10,000) last week.

The prosecutor's office in Kazan has not commented on the Agora case.

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