The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

European Rights Watchdog to Expand in Russia

By Jonathan Earle

May 21, 2013



Thorbjorn Jagland

The Council of Europe, the continent's oldest human rights organization, has announced an agreement to upgrade its Russian office, a sign that Russia takes the 47-member group seriously, a spokesman said, at a time when the Kremlin routinely rejects outside criticism of its rights record.

Turning its information office into a program office with diplomatic immunity will allow the council to assist the Russian government in implementing a list of 27 proposed projects, including an existing plan to create a court of appeals system in Russia.

"This cannot be carried out from [council headquarters in] Strasbourg. We have to have people on the ground, and we have to have people here that can organize all this work," Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland told journalists at a press conference in Moscow on Wednesday.

The agreement shows that Russia is serious about the Council of Europe — the only major European-wide organization in which Russia is a significant member — and plays an important role in it, Jagland's spokesman, Daniel Holtgen, later said by telephone.

During a two-day visit that saw meetings with senior officials, including President Vladimir Putin, and officially ended on Tuesday, Jagland also criticized the so-called "foreign agents" law and called on Russia to respect the right of the LGBT community to hold public demonstrations.

"It goes without saying that authorities have an obligation to protect LGBT people who express their views and demonstrate. This is a fundamental principle in the European Convention on Human Rights," Jagland said. He urged the State Duma not to pass a bill banning "homosexual propaganda."

But rather than condemn a controversial July law that forces non-governmental groups that receive foreign funding and engage in vaguely defined "political activities" to register as "foreign agents," Jagland called on the government not to allow its implementation to harm civil society.

Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov told Jagland that he would make sure it did not, the secretary general said. Jagland heard complaints about the law during a Tuesday morning meeting with prominent NGOs, including the Moscow Helsinki Group, Memorial, and Human Rights Watch.

The diplomat suggested that Russia search for alternative ways of funding NGOs in addition to foreign financing, noting that in his native Norway, non-governmental groups are largely government funded, a model he said had worked well throughout Europe.

"Criticism and discussion are the breathing lungs of any democracy," he said.

But at the same time, Jagland said views on religious matters should be expressed in a "cautious and responsible way" to avoid "creating more tension in society than necessary."

"Extreme words produce, very often, extreme actions," he said.

Asked for his position on a Duma bill that would introduce prison terms and stiff fines for offending religious believers, Jagland responded cautiously, saying any law must not infringe on the fundamental principles of freedom of expression.

Holtgen, his spokesman, put it more forcefully. "Freedom of expression must be allowed, that's the bottom line. There is a court ruling which says that freedom of expression must also be allowed even if it offends and shocks. That is also his position."

Contact the author at j.earle@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/05/21/european-rights-watchdog-to-expand-in-russia-a24255