

NGOs Used as 'Front for Illicit Activity'

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A Justice Ministry official on Monday said controversial spot checks on nongovernmental organizations were needed because many operated as "fronts" for illicit activity.

Anna Kotova, deputy head of the ministry's NGO affairs department, said "a huge number of NGOs" operated outside the law, although she did not give any concrete statistics.

She gave the example of a veterans' association in Russia's western exclave of Kaliningrad that engaged in commercial activity and had a turnover of billions of rubles but, she said, did not pay taxes.

Kotova added that the organization's activities had been uncovered during a spot check carried out by the ministry in conjunction with the tax authorities.

Since March, NGOs across Russia have been subject to random inspections or spot checks that observers have linked to a law introduced in November obliging NGOs that engage in "political activity" and receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents."

Last week, international advocacy group Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a statement saying Russian authorities were using the law to "curtail a broad range of work by independent organizations."

The New York-based group said that "at least 62 groups have received warnings or orders to register as foreign agents" or had faced legal action since the inspection campaign started in March.

Of the seven groups already taken to court, five have been ordered to pay fines and register and another 15 organizations may face administrative charges if they fail to register, HRW said in the statement.

Although the Russian government maintains that the law is designed to prevent foreign interference in the nation's political life, NGOs involved in activities that do not seem expressly political, such as public health and wildlife conservation, have already been held to account under it.

On June 26, the Justice Ministry suspended the activity of independent election monitor Golos, prohibiting it from holding public events and advising it that its bank accounts would be frozen.

However, Golos deputy executive director Grigory Melkonyants said these measures would not interrupt the organization's activities. He said Golos would formally dissolve, and a new election monitoring association would be created.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said last month that, if needed, the "foreign agent" law could be adjusted.

Mikhail Fedotov, head of the Kremlin human rights council, proposed in April that the law be scrapped and that NGO activity be regulated under the Civil Code.

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