

# Putin Urges Moderate Changes in NGO 'Foreign Agent' Law

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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NOVO-OGARYOVO — President Vladimir Putin has said a law branding some non-governmental organizations "foreign agents" should be changed to prevent harassment of groups that are not involved in politics.

His remarks signaled a moderate concession to critics of the law, which has raised concerns among Western governments and been condemned by critics of the Kremlin as part of a campaign to silence independent voices.

Russian authorities have carried out inspections of hundreds of NGOs under the law signed by Putin last year, which requires NGOs that receive funding from abroad and are deemed to be involved in political activity to register as "foreign agents" — a term used by the communist Soviet Union in the Cold War.

Rights campaigners say the authorities have interpreted political activity very broadly,

targeting groups involved in issues including environmental advocacy, surveying public opinion and countering discrimination against homosexuals.

The U.S.-based Human Rights Watch says groups involved in wildlife preservation and helping people with cystic fibrosis had received warnings under the law, although these were later revoked.

Putin seemed to acknowledge that prosecutors and tax inspectors, who have conducted a wave of inspections in recent months, had cast their net too widely.

"I see that in practice, unfortunately, certain mishaps that we did not foresee are occurring," he told a group of Kremlin-aligned human rights activists on Thursday.

"It's necessary to separate [NGOs] involved in political and social issues and not to cause trouble to organizations that only deal with social and health care issues."

Putin ordered his administration to analyze and amend the law to avoid ambiguity, but made clear that foreign-funded NGOs deemed to be involved in politics would still be forced to register.

"If people are involved in domestic politics and receive cash from abroad, society has the right to know which organizations these are and who funds them," he said.

The inspections have led to fines and court cases against several NGOs, some of which have refused to register and said the term "foreign agent" is meant to brand them as traitors.

The vote monitoring group Golos was suspended for six months after refusing to register as a foreign agent. The independent pollster Levada said it might have to close after prosecutors threatened to take it to court if it failed to register.

Putin, president in 2000-08, has been clamping down on dissent since he returned to the Kremlin last year, fostering anti-Western sentiment among the public as a source of political support after he faced the biggest protests against his rule.

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