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Russia Should Drop 'Foreign Agent' Tag for NGOs, Rights Official Says

By The Moscow Times

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A top European human rights official urged Russia on Monday to stop labeling non-governmental organizations as foreign agents under a law he said could have a "chilling effect" on their work.

Nils Muiznieks, human rights commissioner for the Council of Europe, Europe's main rights watchdog of which Russia is a member, said the law should be suspended until changes were made to bring it into line with international standards.

Critics say the law, which has prompted a wave of state inspections of NGOs, is part of a Kremlin campaign aimed at silencing independent voices since President Vladimir Putin began his third term in May last year, although he denies this.

The United States and European Union have both expressed concern over the so-called "foreign agent" law.

The legislation requires NGOs that receive funding from abroad and are deemed to be involved in political activity to register under a label that many Russians associate with the Cold War era of espionage and treason.

"'Foreign agent' has a clearly negative connotation in the Russian context," Muiznieks, a Latvian, said in a telephone interview. "I don't buy the claims of some in the Russian political elite that this is a neutral term."

He said the ability of a number of organizations to work was being affected because some local governments and beneficiaries of NGOs were unwilling or afraid to work with groups that had been or could be labeled as foreign agents.

Spelling out his concerns separately in a written opinion published Monday, Muiznieks said: "Any continuing use of the term 'foreign agent' in the legislation and practice in relation to NGOs would only lead to further stigmatization of civil society in the Russian Federation and will have a chilling effect on its activities."

Muiznieks' role is to promote awareness and respect for human rights in the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe. His recommendations are not mandatory.

Under the new law, Russian authorities have carried out inspections of hundreds of NGOs. Muiznieks said these were "very intrusive and disproportionate" in some cases.

Several NGOs have been fined or issued warnings. Vote-monitoring group Golos, which reported evidence of violations in a 2011 parliamentary election and the 2012 vote that put Putin back in the Kremlin, has been suspended for six months.

Muiznieks said the suspension of Golos was "highly problematic from a human rights point of view" and appeared to run counter to international human rights law.

Putin, who has steadily reasserted his authority since facing the biggest protests of his 13-year rule, said this month that the law should be changed to prevent harassment of groups that are not involved with politics.

His remarks responded to an outcry over warnings issued to NGOs involved in areas such as the environment and health care.

But Putin, who has accused Western states of using NGOs to spy on Russia and to meddle in its affairs, has given no indication that the term "foreign agent" could be dropped.

Russian lawmakers are expected to address the issue after the summer recess.

"I hope, in the interim, that inspections, fines, warnings and so on will be halted," Muiznieks said.

Justice Ministry officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

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