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22 'Foreign Agents' Detected in Russia After Mass Searches, Prosecutor Says

By The Moscow Times

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Mass searches of NGOs across the country have helped to detect 22 "foreign agents," a top official from the Prosecutor General's Office said Thursday.

The law, which requires nongovernmental organizations that receive funding from abroad and engage in "political activity" to register as "foreign agents," came into effect in November.

In March, prosecutors and other state agencies began searching hundreds of organizations, in what Western officials and human rights activists said was an attempt to shut down the activities of human rights groups in Russia.

Prominent human rights organizations like Moscow Helsinki Group, Moscow's office of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and elections watchdog Golos were among those hit with unscheduled inspections.

Twenty-two of the 1,000 NGOs that were checked by the agency were classified as "foreign agents," two of which were found to be engaged in extremist activity, while another two were shut down on terrorism charges, said Alexei Zhavyarov, the deputy head of the Prosecutor General's Office.

The searches will continue until all 2,200 Russian NGOs suspected by prosecutors of receiving funding from abroad have been checked, he said. He also said that 500 violations of Russian legislation by NGOs were detected and that warnings were issued to 193 organizations.

Earlier this month, activists from an NGO in Kostroma filed their first complaint with the Constitutional Court, asking the court to explain the meaning of the term "political activity" used in the so-called foreign agents law and saying that the law itself violates at least five articles of the Constitution.

The Justice Ministry said the searches were an effort to check compliance with the law, but at a meeting with members of the Kremlin's Human Rights Council on Thursday, Zhavyarov said the goals were much wider. He did not elaborate.

Critics of the "foreign agent" law have said it carries echoes of the Cold War and threatens to trigger a new wave of emigration to the West. Many say the term "foreign agent" can be construed as entailing spying or treachery, and activists say such a label scares off potential donors and organizations that would otherwise want to work jointly. The Kremlin has denied that the law is part of a crackdown and said it was meant to prevent "foreign meddling" in Russia's domestic affairs.

President Vladimir Putin said in June that organizations engaging in domestic political activity and receiving foreign funding simply needed to "register in a certain way and then they are free to go ahead with their work."

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