

Russia's Beleaguered Human Rights Defenders Vow Resilience

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Valentin Gefter (l) and Lyudmila Alexeyeva (r) taking part in a protest with fellow rights activist Lev Ponomarev.

Election-monitoring watchdog Golos won a rare victory among Russian NGOs on Tuesday when a Moscow court ruled it should not after all be labeled a "foreign agent." But rights activists warn that the battle against the "foreign agents" label is only the tip of the iceberg in a far broader pressure campaign being waged by the authorities.

The controversial law passed in 2012 that allows rights NGOs to be labeled "foreign agents" if they receive foreign funding and are involved in loosely defined "political" activities is the latest tactic being used to silence human rights NGOs, the country's veteran rights defenders say.

"For those of us who are experienced human rights defenders, this law is merely another chance to show our legal muscle. But for a huge number of human rights NGOs, this is indeed

a dangerous punch," says Boris Altshuler, chairman of the board of Right of the Child, and a former aide to the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov.

Under the law defining "foreign agents" — a label critics argue has Cold War connotations of espionage that no self-respecting organization could accept — influencing public opinion is defined as a form of political activity. Rights activists reject any link between politics and human rights.

"Human rights defense is mandated by the Russian Constitution and should not be confused with politics," said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, chairperson of the Moscow Helsinki Group and one of the undisputed leaders of the human rights movement in Russia.

"In any normal state, politics is the fight for power. I have been a human rights defender since the movement's birth in the mid-'60s, and I remain a human rights defender. I have never been in power," she said.

Altshuler said it was left to NGOs to fight for rights in the absence of any efforts from political parties.

"We as human rights defenders don't participate in politics, but the reality is such that it may seem that it is only us who think about the needs of the people, while the political opposition disregards the fate of millions they are meant to serve," he said.

Under Pressure

Alexeyeva, razor-sharp at 88, said human rights NGOs have faced increased pressure since 2006, resulting in many organizations closing.

"I have the impression that our current authorities have decided to destroy the human rights movement, including independent NGOs," said Alexeyeva. "The first step toward this was the introduction of the NGO law in 2006, which placed all public organizations under extremely strict control, including financial control and stringent reporting, of the Justice Ministry."

The law led to the closing of at least 400,000 public organizations and associations, resulting in a current number of just more than 200,000 NGOs in Russia, down from 650,000 in 2005, she said.

"Something changed in the Kremlin beginning in June 2012, and the pressure on human rights defenders has continued to grow since," said Altshuler.

"The Ukrainian affair — the culmination of this ridiculous outburst of hatred [against Ukrainian authorities] that we see from the official media and the State Duma — was created by the same destructive forces in the Kremlin who are suffocating Russia's still-emerging civil society," he said.

Valentin Gefter, director of the Human Rights Institute and one of the founders of the Memorial human rights group, cited the growth of nationalism, xenophobia and populism and fear of "color revolutions" and anti-government protests as factors in the government's crackdown on NGOs.

Yury Savenko, head of the Independent Psychiatric Association that opposes the practice of punitive psychiatry still occasionally seen in Russia, said the very concept of human rights had acquired negative connotations as a result of the pressure campaign.

"We are currently facing a return to the Soviet past. A priority is the recognition of human rights for what they are: that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights holds intrinsic value and should be interpreted as a 'civil religion,' not as a cunning invention of the West," said Savenko.

"The most negative impact on the human rights movement has been the monopolization of news television, a phenomenon that cannot entail long-term success," he said.

State Domination

Via its various structures, the state continues to dominate all spheres of society, experts agreed, including the discourse on human rights, where the state-sponsored Public Chamber regulated by federal law and appointed partly by the president has come to prominence during the last few years.

"The topic of cooperation with the state, of the level of trust the state is capable of eliciting, remains one of the most sensitive and sharply discussed," said Savenko, adding that several experienced human rights defenders have already left the ranks of the movement because they see it as too conformist.

"We have no rule of law as such, no separation of powers. The Russian tradition of authoritarianism continues to solidify," he said.

Dependence on the state also extends to funding, especially in light of the move to discourage groups from accepting financing from abroad.

"We have a number of educated wealthy people, but all of our entrepreneurs are dependent on the government, and if they finance disloyal organizations, their business in Russia will be over," said Alexeyeva.

"Russian citizens simply have nowhere else to go in an environment where all courts and law enforcement are de facto answerable to the executive," Altshuler agreed. "The country is under an irrational form of manual control."

Not Just for Liberals

Seasoned rights activists reject the idea that they appeal primarily to the liberal segment of the country's population, arguing that they fight for universal human values found in the Russian Constitution and international human rights norms.

"I assure you that there is no room for such divisions when we are talking about saving a child or helping a homeless family," said Altshuler.

"We don't appeal to liberals exclusively, we just want to do our work. However, I never miss an opportunity to speak out, while there is not much hope to be heard," said Alexeyeva.

Gefter concurred. "Our target audience is not the liberal segment of society, nor even the bureaucracy, but those in need of improved solutions for the most visible human rights abuses and the enforcement of principles of the state governed by rule of law," he said. "An opposition to tyranny at all levels takes precedence over the acquisition of sympathies."

If in the Soviet Union, the emphasis in the human rights movement was on civil and political rights, after its collapse, the focus shifted toward other fields including social rights and ecology, Alexeyeva said. "But ultimately, there would be no other rights without civil and political rights," she said.

Cautious Optimism

Despite the challenges faced by NGOs in today's Russia, veteran activists are adamant they will not give up. They have witnessed persecution, forced emigration and libelous campaigns in the media, among other tactics. The memory of Stalinism is not so distant for them, and they realize better than most that it takes a state a mere moment to destroy an individual, to trump their human dignity and free will.

"The human rights movement can disappear only in two situations: in the event that all legal issues are resolved by the state, which is unlikely even in the most exemplary of societies, or in the event that the country is engulfed by mass terror," said Altshuler.

"I will always bet on civil society whenever we talk about the struggle between civil society and the state. I know I am on the right side," said Alexeyeva.

"Governments come and go, while the human rights movement remains," she said.

"Whatever happened to the Soviet Union, the KGB and the Central Committee?"

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