

Veteran Human Rights Group Abandons Most Operations in Russia

September 29, 2014

The  Moscow Times

The Moscow Helsinki Group, an organization that has campaigned for human rights in Russia since Soviet times, announced on Monday that it has folded most operations in the country due to funding issues.

"We've cut projects to a bare minimum. You could say we're simply surviving," the organization's chairwoman Lyudmila Alexeyeva said, Interfax reported.

The group has suspended its educational program, sacked 10 of 17 staffers and cut salaries for the rest, the 87-year-old activist said.

The cuts came despite a presidential grant of 4.5 million rubles (\$115,000), which the organization has allocated to promoting public oversight of Russia's often-criticized police force.

Alexeyeva blamed the cuts on decreased foreign-donor activity due to recent legislation.

A law passed in 2012 requires any NGO that engages in loosely defined "political activities" and receives funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents," a derogative Soviet-era term, leaving them mired in red tape.

Many independent NGOs have complained about the law, saying it was aimed at stifling civic activity. They claimed that foreign funding was mandatory because potential donors at home were reluctant to support rights groups for fear of incurring the Kremlin's indignation.

Alexeyeva, who began her rights campaigning in the mid-1960s, reiterated criticism of the law, but pledged that the Moscow Helsinki Group — which was established in 1976 — will continue to trudge forward with its work.

"We survived without money in Soviet times. If there's no money, we will continue operating on volunteer help," the veteran activist said.

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