

## Russian NGOs Propose Unionizing

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A woman surveys the work of a graffiti artist, who has painted the words "Foreign Agent" on the side of a building.

Russian nongovernmental organizations should form a union in order to defend their interests more effectively in disputes with the state, organizers of the third All-Russian Civil Forum hosted by former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, were quoted by the Vedomosti newspaper as saying Monday.

The proposed organization is provisionally referred to as the Russian Third Sector Union, said Grigory Melkonyants, one of the leaders of the voters' rights group Golos, lamenting the lack of a forum for Russian NGOs to relate their interests to authorities.

The NGO leader proposed that the union comprise the heads of charities, human rights groups, and environmental organizations with representation in at least 45 regions across Russia. The union, according to Melkonyants, could be similar to associations representing business interests.

According to Melkonyants, the proposed union has already won the support of prominent human rights activists such as Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Lev Ponomaryov, and Svetlana

Gannushkina.

However, other activists, such as the head of the Russian branch of the World Wildlife Fund, Igor Chestin, said the group needs a means to filter out groups like the infamous Night Wolves — a nationalist biker gang notorious for their staunch pro-Russian stance and close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Kudrin, for his part, said in an interview with Vedomosti that the union would help NGOs help each other, and open channels of dialogues with the Russian government — which has hurt the non-profit sector with a law forcing NGOs to register as "foreign agents" if they receive funds from abroad or engage in loosely defined political activity.

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