The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Branded Foreign Agents, Russia's Domestic Violence Groups Fear for the Future

Activists say the crackdown is intensifying even as reports of abuse doubled with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

By Samantha Berkhead and Uliana Pavlova

March 11, 2021



Nasiliu.net founder Anna Rivina. **Sergei Fadeichev / TASS**

Russia's decision to label one of its leading women's aid groups a "foreign agent" after a year when domestic violence spiked signals a widening crackdown on organizations seeking to tackle the problem, activists told The Moscow Times.

The country's Justice Ministry added Nasiliu.net — Russian for "No to Violence" — to the register formed by a 2012 law that allows any politically active individual or organization accepting funding from abroad to be labeled a foreign agent.

Meanwhile, reports of domestic violence doubled after the onset of the coronavirus pandemic as millions were confined to their homes in a country already grappling with an epidemic of abuse.

“The system has directed all its weapons against us and everything that we do,” said Alyona Popova, a women’s rights advocate who founded the *Ti Ne Odna* (You Are Not Alone) self-help network.

Related article: When Your Home Isn't a Safe Space. Russian Women Fear Rise in Domestic Violence as Coronavirus Quarantine Starts.

Nasiliu.net, which gets the majority of its funding from individual donors, provides psychological and legal support for women stuck in dangerous situations through an app and a Moscow help center.

Founder and director Anna Rivina linked the foreign agent designation to authorities’ efforts to silence dissenting voices.

“This is absolutely a political reaction from the government ... this once again makes it clear to people that the state is in favor of domestic violence,” she said.

Although women’s rights NGOs like Nasiliu.net aren’t explicitly political in nature, the government considers their support for a bill to re-criminalize domestic violence to be political activity.

Currently, Russia has no specific law on domestic violence, and the country passed a bill in 2017 scrapping prison sentences for first-time abusers whose beatings result in “minor harm." Women’s rights activists have pushed for the passage of a law to reverse that move, saying it is the bare minimum required to change a widespread culture of impunity for abusers. While a draft domestic violence bill was introduced in the State Duma in 2019, its progress has stalled due to the pandemic.

By forcing labeled entities to submit to rigorous quarterly financial audits, with steep fines for inaccurate reporting, activists say the foreign agents law stifles groups that offer a lifeline to victims of abuse.

At the same time, homegrown funding for domestic violence NGOs is drying up, with state grants more likely to go to organizations promoting so-called “traditional” values.

The law also requires labeled NGOs to add the foreign agent designation to their websites and printed materials, which prevents domestic violence groups from posting signs in public with information on where to get help, Rivina said.

The government’s stance on domestic violence NGOs has been heavily influenced by conservative activists and religious leaders, who consider anti-domestic violence legislation to be an illegal intrusion on private family life. Women’s rights groups are also perceived as part of a transnational movement hostile to Russia’s sovereignty, analysts say.

Related article: Russia's Deadly Negligence of Domestic Violence

Marina Pisklakova-Parker, head of the Anna Center women's rights group, had the foreign agent designation slapped on her organization in 2016 after she pushed for stronger domestic violence legislation.

She said the issue of domestic violence was not so politicized when the Anna Center was founded in the 1990s, with dialogue around the problem focused on attempting to find a solution.

"It became politicized when radical groups started lobbying against the law on domestic violence. These groups basically protect the right to be abusive, and they just used the opportunity that the foreign agents legislation provides," she said.

Alienate and discredit

Both Pisklakova-Parker and Popova said that by branding activists as an external threat, the foreign agents law's end result is alienating and discrediting them among the public.

"What happened to Anya [Rivina] is an effort to encourage people and companies not to help women's organizations," Popova said. "You are such an outcast from society — you are an agent. You wear this label and everyone around you starts to shy away from you."

Nasiliu.net is now facing growing pressure outside the "foreign agent" law as well.

Rivina said Nasiliu.net's landlord has ordered the group to vacate the central Moscow office where it provides therapy and legal assistance to domestic violence victims by the end of the month.

"They basically told us that our activities didn't suit them," she wrote in a Facebook post earlier this month. "A new office for such a large-scale organization — that's a lot of money."

Despite Nasiliu.net's new status, Rivina said the number of women seeking assistance from her group has remained steady.

"They understand that we are not engaged in political activities, we are helping them directly and they feel this help and they remain grateful to us. In this sense, we have no difficulties," she said.

Still, she said she sees the situation for Russia's domestic abuse organizations getting worse before it gets better.

"Everything has a punitive bias and it's not yet clear when all this will somehow change. In addition, it's worth remembering that the law against domestic violence has not yet been adopted. All of this says that we are either standing still or rolling back into a not-very-happy past."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/11/branded-foreign-agents-russias-domestic-violence-groups-fear-for-the-future-a73212