

Inside Russia's "foreign agent" NGO law

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Increased surveillance, government audits, and even complete organisation shutdown have been the effects of the Russian law requiring NGOs to register as "foreign agents." Maria Razumovskaya, deputy chair for Citizens' Watch in St. Petersburg, said the human rights organisation experienced an intense investigation by the Russian government last year.

"It took two months for them to check every file and folder in our offices: the financial documents, the charter, our activities. They checked everything including the fire alarms."

The original law, passed in 2012, mandated that all non-governmental organisations register as "foreign agents" if they receive funding from outside the country. The process is deeply bureaucratic and time-consuming and may result in audits, intervention in NGO activities, and penalties designed to restrict the free speech of organisations. Despite significant criticism, the law was upheld in Constitutional Court in 2014 and amended to allow the Ministry of Justice to register NGOs without the organisations' consent.

Citizens' Watch was not registered as a "foreign agent" after the investigation but was formally warned by prosecutors that it may be forced to register in the future. Not all organisations, however, have been as fortunate. Some NGOs have lost their court cases concerning the forced registration, and some have had to shut down altogether.

Razumovskaya says Citizens' Watch will continue its work as usual and will not register. Citizens' Watch was established in 1992 with the intent of monitoring police, armed forces and other government agencies and preventing violations of constitutional rights. Currently the NGO is working on various projects ranging from increasing court transparency to campaigns against racism and xenophobia. In the past, the organisation has worked with government agencies to conduct seminars and training sessions for defence lawyers, judges and court reporters.

However, Razumovskaya reveals that the recent crackdown has made her organisation's work more difficult on the administrative level and in regards to public relations. The phrase "foreign agent" carries a negative connotation in Russia, where during the Soviet era and Cold War the term was reserved for spies and insurgents.

While in general people are still eager to be involved and are receptive to its campaigns, Citizens' Watch is struggling to continue its work with judges and other government officials, says Razumovskaya. No specific penalties have been laid out for officials involved with NGOs, but officials are feeling increased pressure from the government to

distance themselves from human rights organisations in particular. There is a noticeable difference in the attitudes of the judges, Razumovskaya says, and they seldom take part in the organisation's activities.

"The idea is that Russia is surrounded by enemies," says Razumovskaya. "NGOs receiving foreign funds are apparently working in the interest of a foreign country. This is how it would be perceived by Russian officials if we were to be labelled as a 'foreign agent.'"

Although Citizens' Watch is almost completely funded by grants and donations from foreign sponsors, Razumovskaya explained that the donors have no agenda. The funding is used for programmes to benefit people in Russia, and donors have never pushed for their own interests or platforms.

For now Citizens' Watch has not been forcibly registered as a "foreign agent," and Razumovskaya urges her foreign colleagues to stay in touch and continue work with human rights organisations in Russia. Sometimes groups in other countries fear that working with groups in Russia will put the Russian organisations in danger, says Razumovskaya, but organisations must keep collaborating.