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Russia: A year on, Putin's 'foreign agents law' choking freedom

A restrictive "foreign agents law" adopted a year ago is choking independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia, Amnesty International said today.

"One year after came into force, the record of the foreign agents law is a grim one. More than a thousand NGOs have been inspected and dozens have received warnings. Several of the most prominent human rights groups have been fined and some forced to close," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

The "foreign agents law" is at the centre of a raft of repressive legislation that has been brought in since Putin's return to the presidency.

Enacted by the Russian authorities on 21 November 2012, it requires any NGO receiving foreign funding and engaging in what it defines very loosely as "political activity" to register as an "organization performing the functions of a foreign agent".

It has a wide reach affecting NGOs working on civil and political, social and economic rights, as well as environmental issues and discrimination, including against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people.

As the Winter Olympic Games to be held in the Russian city of Sochi approach, Amnesty International's members and supporters from around the world are campaigning to highlight Russia's increasingly deplorable human rights record.

"The "foreign agents law" was designed to stigmatise and discredit NGOs engaged in human rights, election monitoring and other critical work. It is providing a perfect pretext for fining and closing critical organisations and will cut often vital funding streams," said John Dalhuisen.

Russian NGOs have unanimously and vocally refused to be branded "foreign agents". The unannounced mass "inspections" of some 1,000 organizations during the spring and autumn of 2013 were widely publicized by media aligned with the Russian authorities.

The "inspections" were followed by persecution of several NGOs and their leaders through administrative proceedings and the courts, and more cases are expected to follow.

The team of election watchdog Golos ("Voice") decided to disband their organization after the law was used to impose hefty fines on them and suspend their work for several months. They tried in vain to challenge the punitive measure in court before giving up.

The Kostroma Centre for Support of Public Initiatives suffered the same fate and closed because it could not pay the huge fine imposed on it.

The LGBTI film festival Bok o Bok (“Side by side”) paid the fine and closed down. It had officially ceased to exist by the time it won its appeal and could no longer claim the money back.

This week alone, five Moscow-based NGOs, Memorial, Public Verdict, “For Human Rights” movement, Jurix and Golos, were in court trying to fend off the pressure exerted on them by the authorities’ under the so-called “foreign agents law”. Court hearings on their cases have been postponed; numerous other NGOs across Russia have been in court since April for the same reason.

Since the “foreign agents law” came into being:

- At least 10 NGOs have been taken to court by the Russian authorities for failing to register as an “organization performing the functions of a foreign agent”.
- At least five other NGOs across Russia have been taken to court following the “inspections” for purported administrative violations such as the failure to present requested documents.
- At least 10 Russian NGO leaders have been ordered to comply with the “foreign agents law”.
- And at least 37 NGOs have been officially warned that they will be in violation of the law if they continue to receive foreign funding and engage in arbitrarily defined “political activities”. This includes publishing online materials on human rights in Russia and not registering as “foreign agents”.

Russian NGO leaders have told Amnesty International about their frustrations with the law.

The rights group “Alliance of Women of the Don” advises local people on issues affecting their everyday lives – family, labour, housing, pensions. The organisation is facing a court case next week for refusing to register as a “foreign agent”.

“We have nothing to be ashamed of and we have nothing to feel guilty for. We are proud of our work. The closure of our organization will affect so many people,” said Valentina Cherevatenko, leader of the Alliance.

Lev Ponomaryov, leader of the Russia-wide movement “For Human Rights” told Amnesty International: “If we have to close down, thousands of people across Russia will suffer. If other NGOs are forced to close down – tens of thousands will suffer. Civil society will be doomed.”

“The ‘foreign agents law’ violates Russia’s national and international obligations to safeguard the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression. It should be repealed immediately,” said John Dalhuisen.