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Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups

The Battle Chronicle

For the past four years, the Kremlin has sought to stigmatize criticism or alternative views of government policy as disloyal, foreign-sponsored, or even traitorous. It is part of a sweeping crackdown to silence critical voices that has included new legal restrictions on the internet, on freedom of expression, on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, and on other fundamental freedoms.

An enduring, central feature has been the 2012 law requiring

independent groups to register as “foreign agents” if they receive any foreign funding and engage in broadly defined “political activity.” In Russia, the term “foreign agent” can be interpreted by the public only as “spy” or “traitor.” To date, Russia’s Justice Ministry has designated 158 groups as “foreign agents,” courts have levied staggering fines on many groups for failing to comply with the law, and about 30 groups have shut down rather than wear the “foreign agent” label. Organizations targeted include groups that work on human rights, the environment, LGBT issues, and health issues, groups that do polling about social issues. A court forced the closure of AGORA Association, one of Russia’s leading human rights organizations, in response to a Justice Ministry suit alleging that the group violated the “foreign agents” law and carried out work beyond its mandate.



On the night before the “foreign agents” law came into force, unknown individuals sprayed graffiti reading, “Foreign Agent! ♥ USA” on the buildings hosting the offices of three prominent NGOs in Moscow, including Memorial.

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The ministry has removed its “foreign agent” tag from over 20 groups, acknowledging that they had stopped accepting foreign funding. Accordingly, as of June 18, 2018, the official list of active “foreign agents” consisted of 76 groups.

The ‘Foreign Agent’ Law

Under the 2012 law, groups must register with the Justice Ministry as “foreign agents” if they receive even a minimal amount of funding from any foreign sources, governmental or private, and engage in “political activity.” The definition of political activity under the law is so broad and vague that it effectively extends to all aspects of advocacy and human rights work. Initially, the law required all nongovernmental organizations that met these criteria to register with the ministry and to identify themselves as “foreign agents” in all their public materials, with legal consequences for failure to comply.

Russia’s human rights groups resolutely boycotted the law, calling it “unjust” and “slandorous.” In 2013, Russia’s then-federal ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, challenged the law in Russia’s Constitutional Court. In 2014, the court upheld the law, finding that there were no legal or constitutional grounds for contending that the term “foreign agent” had negative connotations from the Soviet era and that, therefore, its use was “not intended to persecute or discredit” organizations. The court also found that the “foreign agent” designation was in line with the public interest and the interest of state sovereignty.

Two years of mounting pressure by the authorities, court proceedings, and massive fines did not succeed in forcing groups to voluntarily register as foreign agents. In May 2014 Russia’s parliament amended the “foreign agents” law to authorize the Justice Ministry to register groups as “foreign agents” without their consent.

In May 2016, parliament adopted another set of amendments to the law, expanding the controversial definition of “political activity” to include, among other things, any attempt by an independent group to influence public policy, regardless of the group’s mandate.

To date, the registry of “foreign agents” includes the following organizations:

1. Association of non-profit organizations in defense of voters’ rights “Golos” (Moscow) – June 5, 2014
2. Interregional public organization "Human Rights Center 'Memorial' " (Moscow) – July 21, 2014
3. Regional public organization “Ecozashchita! – Womens’ Council” (Kaliningrad) – July 21, 2014

4. Foundation for assistance to protection of citizens' rights and freedoms "Public Verdict" (Moscow) – July 21, 2014
5. Foundation "Institute for Information Freedom Development" (Saint-Petersburg) – August 28, 2014
6. Private institution "Information Agency MEMO. RU" (Moscow) – November 20, 2014
7. Non-profit partnership "Institute of Regional Press" (Saint-Petersburg) – November 20, 2014
8. Autonomous non-profit organization "Moscow School of Civic Education" – December 9, 2014
9. Arkhangelsk regional public organization of socio-psychological and legal assistance to lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people (LGBT) "Rakurs" (Arkhangelsk) – December 15, 2014
10. Regional public organization "Public Commission for the Preservation of the Heritage of Academician Sakharov" (Moscow) – December 25, 2014
11. Kaliningrad regional public organization "Human Rights Center" (Kaliningrad) – December 25, 2014
12. Free Press Support Foundation – December 30, 2014
13. Saint-Petersburg public human rights organization "Civil Control" (Saint-Peterburg) – December 30, 2014
14. Interregional public human rights organization "Man and the Law" (Yoshkar-Ola) – December 30, 2014
15. Interregional public organization "Information-Educational Center 'Memorial' " (Yekaterinburg) – January 16, 2015
16. Information Bureau of the Nordic Council of Ministers in Saint-Petersburg (Saint-Petersburg) – January 20, 2015
17. Non-profit partnership "Press Development Institute - Siberia" (Novosibirsk) – January 30, 2015
18. Interregional public foundation for civil society development "GOLOS Povolzhie" (Samara) – February 6, 2015
19. City public organization "Samara Center for Gender Studies" – February 16, 2015
20. Regional foundation "Center for the Protection of Mass Media Rights" (Voronezh) – February 26, 2015
21. Autonomous non-profit organization "Center for Anti-Corruption Research and Initiatives 'Transparency International-R' " – April 7, 2015
22. Ozersk city social and environmental public organization "Planet of hopes" (Ozersk) – April 15, 2015
23. Regional public charitable organization for assistance to refugees and migrants "Civil Assistance [Civic Assistance Committee]" (Moscow) – April 20, 2015
24. Interregional charitable public organization "Center for Development of Non-Profit Organizations" (Saint-Petersburg) – May 13, 2015

25. Establishment "Informational Bureau of the Council of Ministers of Northern Countries" (Kaliningrad) – May 13, 2015
26. Non-governmental specialists' educational institution of additional professional education (advanced training) "Academy of Human Rights" (Yekaterinburg) – May 15, 2015
27. Sverdlovsk regional public organization "Sutyajnik" (Yekaterinburg) – May 15, 2015
28. Non-profit programmes foundation of Dmitry Zimin "Dynasty" – May 25, 2015
29. Interregional public "Foundation for Peace in the South and North Caucasus" (Stavropol) – June 19, 2015
30. Autonomous non-profit organization "Center for Independent Social Research" (Saint-Petersburg) – June 22, 2015
31. Regional public organization for promoting protection of reproductive health of citizens "Population and Development" – June 23, 2015
32. Association "Assistance in Legal Protection of People 'Legal Basis' " (Yekaterinburg) – July 3, 2015
33. Komi regional public organization "Commission for Protection of Human Rights 'Memorial' " (Syktyvkar) – July 21, 2015
34. Interregional public foundation for civil society development "GOLOS-Ural" (Chelyabinsk region) – July 27, 2015
35. Media Support Foundation "Sreda" – July 28, 2015
36. Foundation "Civic Action" (Perm) – August 5, 2015
37. Chechen regional public organization "Human Rights Center of the Chechen Republic" (Grozny) – August 21, 2015
38. Public organization "Perm Regional Human Rights Center" (Perm) – September 3, 2015
39. Autonomous non-profit organization "Far Eastern Center for Civil Initiatives and Social Partnership" (Vladivostok) – October 13, 2015
40. Union of public associations "Russian Human Rights Research Center" (Moscow) – October 20, 2015
41. Foundation for Promotion of Civil Society and Human Rights "Women of the Don" (Novocherkassk) – October 27, 2015
42. Regional public institution "Research and Information Center 'MEMORIAL' " (Saint-Petersburg) – November 6, 2015
43. Non-profit organization "Glasnost Defense Foundation" – November 19, 2015
44. Autonomous non-profit organization "Institute of Human Rights" (Moscow) – November 20, 2015
45. Regional public organization "Information and Research Center 'Panorama' " (Moscow) – December 18, 2015
46. City public organization "Ekaterinburg society 'Memorial' " (Yekaterinburg) – December 30, 2015

47. Nizhny Novgorod regional public organization "Institute for Forecasting and Settlement of Political Conflicts" (Nizhny Novgorod) – January 22, 2016
48. City public organization "Ryazan historical, educational and human rights society 'Memorial' " (Ryazan) – February 1, 2016
49. Chelyabinsk regional public initiative - women's public association "Women of Eurasia" (Chelyabinsk) – February 15, 2016
50. Chelyabinsk regional public initiative "Ural Human Rights Group" (Chelyabinsk) – February 15, 2016
51. Omsk regional public organization "Center for Health and Social Protection 'SIBALT' " (Omsk) – February 15, 2016
52. Charitable foundation for social and legal support "Sphere" (Saint Petersburg) – March 1, 2016
53. Interregional public organization "Center for Civic Education and Human Rights" (Perm) – March 3, 2016
54. Autonomous non-profit organization "Publishing House 'Valentin Manuylov' " – April 15, 2016
55. Regional public organization "Integration Center 'Migration and Law' " (Moscow) – June 16, 2016
56. Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice Promotion (Moscow) – June 29, 2016
57. Autonomous non-profit organization "Publishing house 'Park Gagarina' " (Samara) – August 31, 2016
58. Autonomous non-profit organization "Analytical Center of Yuri Levada" (Moscow) – September 5, 2016
59. International public organization "International Historical-Educational, Charitable and Human Rights Society 'Memorial' " (Moscow) – October 4, 2016
60. Sverdlovsk regional public foundation "Health Era" (Yekaterinburg) – October 11, 2016
61. Chapaevsk city public organization "Association of Medical Workers of Chapaevsk" (Chapaevsk) – October 21, 2016
62. Regional charitable foundation "Samarskaya Gubernia" (Samara) – November 2, 2016
63. Autonomous non-profit organization for social support "Project April" (Tolyatti) – December 19, 2016
64. Regional public organization for assistance to women and children in crisis "Information and Methodological Center 'Anna' " (Moscow) – December 26, 2016
65. Regional public organization for promotion of citizens' education "Center for Information and Analysis 'SOVA' " (Moscow) – December 30, 2016
66. Sverdlovsk public organization for assistance to legal migration "Nelegalov.Net [No Illegals]" (Yekaterinburg) – January 10, 2017
67. Foundation for development assistance to mass communication and legal education "Tak-Tak-Tak" (Novosibirsk) – February 20, 2017

68. Foundation for sustainable development "Silver Taiga" (Syktyvkar) – June 23, 2017
69. All-Russian public organization promoting the development of road transport “Association of Carriers of Russia” (Saint-Petersburg) – December 1, 2017
70. Altai regional public movement for support of civil and social initiatives "Consent" (Barnaul) – December 13, 2017
71. City charitable foundation "Tolyatti Fund" (Tolyatti) – December 20, 2017
72. Foundation "Institute of Economic and Social Research" (Volgograd) – December 28, 2017
73. Saratov regional office of the interregional public organization "Euro-Asian Geophysical Society" (Saratov) – March 5, 2018
74. Charitable foundation for prisoners and their families (Moscow) – May 7, 2018

And two NGOs which registered voluntarily:

1. Association “Supporting Competition in the CIS Countries” (Moscow) – June 27, 2013
2. Sverdlovsk regional public social projects foundation "New Time" (Yekaterinburg) – June 23, 2017

On June 27, 2016, Russian authorities notified the head of “Women of the Don” human rights and peace building group, Valentina Cherevatenko, that they were bringing criminal proceedings against her for “malicious evasion” of legal requirements set out in the “foreign agents” law. Cherevatenko was formally charged on June 2, 2017, becoming the first Russian activist to face prosecution under the law, but the law enforcement authorities dropped the case against her several weeks later. On June 27, 2016, Russian authorities notified the head of “Women of the Don” human rights and peace building group, Valentina Cherevatenko, that they were bringing criminal proceedings against her for “malicious evasion” of legal requirements set out in the “foreign agents” law. Cherevatenko was formally charged on June 2, 2017, becoming the first Russian activist to face prosecution under the law, but the law enforcement authorities dropped the case against her several weeks later. On June 27, 2016, Russian authorities notified the head of “Women of the Don” human rights and peace building group, Valentina Cherevatenko, that they were bringing criminal proceedings against her for “malicious evasion” of legal requirements set out in the “foreign agents” law. Cherevatenko was formally charged on June 2, 2017, becoming the first Russian activist to face prosecution under the law, but the law enforcement authorities dropped the case against her several weeks later.

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- August 28, 2018 Letter

Open Letter by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders to the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin



August 28, 2018 News Release

Russia: Chechen Leader Threatens Human Rights Defenders

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