

Kremlin Faces Barbs From All Sides on Human Rights

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill leading an Easter service in 2011. Council of Europe chief Thorbjorn Jagland raised gay rights during a meeting with Patriarch Kirill, who has overseen a government-backed campaign to reassert conservative values.

Russia is facing a renewed barrage of international criticism, led by the European Union, over its human rights record in connection with an ongoing clampdown on non-governmental organizations and a State Duma proposal to ban so-called "homosexual propaganda."

The EU on Friday expressed growing concerns about the situation, including the impact of a July law that requires NGOs that engage in "political activity" and receive foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," a term widely associated with treason.

Last month, elections watchdog Golos was fined 300,000 rubles (\$10,000) for failing to register, becoming the first NGO to be punished for falling afoul of the controversial law. The Memorial anti-discrimination center in St. Petersburg and others could face similar

penalties.

The 27-member body also urged Russia not to pass a federal law banning gay propaganda, which it feared could "increase discrimination and violence" against LGBT individuals, a risk driven home by the recent killing of a 23-year-old man in Volgograd that police said was linked to homophobia.

The EU statement coincided with the latest round of human rights consultations with Russia, which took place in Brussels on Friday.

The next round is expected to take place in the fall. It is not clear where they will happen; all 17 rounds have taken place in Europe, though the EU has repeatedly expressed a desire to meet in Moscow.

Russia was expected to get another earful on Monday, when Secretary General Thorbjorn Jagland of the Council of Europe, the continent's oldest human rights organization, was scheduled to meet with President Vladimir Putin in Sochi.

Jagland once said the foreign agents law, then a bill, reminded him of methods used by Soviet secret police. "Some of those executed during the [Josef] Stalin era were called foreign agents," he [told](#) RIA-Novosti at the time.

The secretary general is scheduled to meet with Russian NGOs on Tuesday morning, as well as with Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov to discuss how the law should be changed in practice or on paper, his spokesman said by telephone on Monday.

"It's the word 'foreign agent' and the definition of 'political activities' in the law that causes questions," spokesman Daniel Holtgen said.

Results of the meeting with Putin were not publicly available as of 7 p.m. on Monday evening.

NGO leaders have argued that the Golos case and unannounced inspections on hundreds of groups across the country, which the government says is necessary to enforce the law, are actually part of a scare campaign aimed at silencing government critics.

Earlier this month, the United Nations special rapporteurs on freedom of association, human rights defenders and freedom said implementation of the law was having "obstructive, intimidating and stigmatizing effects" on Russian civil society.

Maina Kiai, the special rapporteur on the rights to peaceful assembly and association, said they were also illegal under international law, which does not stipulate protection of sovereignty as a basis to restrict freedom of association, Kiai said in a statement on the UN's [website](#).

Putin has portrayed the checks as a step towards bringing transparency to a shady sector, which he said took in 28.3 billion rubles (\$906 million) in foreign funding in the four months after the law appeared in July, a figure human rights leaders dismissed as grossly inflated.

"This can't but raise questions, and our society has a right to know where this money is coming from and with what goals in mind," Putin [told](#) reporters during a visit to Germany

in April.

Russian diplomats on Friday said they presented the EU with "all necessary explanations" and called on member states to refrain from "ideological judgements" and to not permit "attempts to interfere in Russia's internal affairs," according to a statement on the Foreign Ministry's [website](#).

Russia also shot back with human rights accusations of its own, urging the EU to pressure Latvia and Estonia to protect the rights of Russian-speaking minorities and condemn "attempts to glorify" former Nazi SS legionnaires, according to the statement.

Most of the 1.1 million Russian-speakers in the Baltic states live in Latvia and Estonia, and many have never learned the native languages required for citizenship or have chosen to remain non-citizens, which has put them at a higher risk of social marginalization.

Minority rights have also been in the spotlight in Russia recently, particularly since the Duma gave preliminary approval in January to a bill that would effectively prohibit gay rights demonstrations or other public displays of support for sexual minorities.

Jagland brought the issue up during a meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, who has overseen a government-backed campaign to reassert conservative values.

"This is not a question of promoting LGBT rights from our side, but rather of protecting their rights," Holtgen said.

St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk and several other cities have approved laws banning homosexual propaganda in recent months, arguing that gay rights marches and other public expressions of support for gays are harmful to children and contradict traditional Russian values.

But the bans appear to have widespread support in Russia, where the 73 percent of respondents to a recent poll said the government should suppress any public expression of homosexuality or support for it, according to the independent [Levada Center](#).

Moscow's City Hall, which has never sanctioned a gay rights demonstration, on Friday rejected a request from gay rights activists to hold a march this month, saying that the desired location would be occupied by graduation day revelers.

The European Court of Human Rights, which is overseen by the Council of Europe, ruled in Oct. 2010 that Russia violated the right to freedom of assembly by refusing to allow gay rights protests in 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Russia looks likely to get yet another lashing from Amnesty International for the "ongoing persecution of NGOs and critics of the government and the deficiencies in the Russian legal system," when the London-based group issues its annual report on Thursday, according to an e-mailed statement.

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