

Operation Total Eradication of NGOs

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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Although many initially thought that the government's repressive new law aimed at nongovernmental organizations and the so-called "Dima Yakovlev" law, which bans U.S. citizens from adopting Russian orphans, represented a surgical attack against a few undesirable organizations, it has now become clear that the authorities are intent on completely eradicating all remnants of civil society.

The Kremlin's goal is to completely block foreign funding of all NGOs and to shut down those that resist the ban or the requirement to label themselves as "foreign agents." Meanwhile, it has stepped up funding of Kremlin-friendly NGOs by allocating grants through the Public Chamber and money through regional budgets to create a wide network of NGOs that are completely dependent on the authorities for their existence. Since Russian businesses do not fund NGOs unless they have been directed or given approval to do so by the authorities, independent NGOs will disappear altogether, leaving only those that are loyal to the authorities. Thus, Kremlin-friendly NGOs will be added to the Kremlin's vertical-power arsenal, along with the courts, the siloviki, mainstream media and the State Duma.

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Justice Ministry and other government agencies is underway to eliminate all independent NGOs.

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The first blow was strategically directed against the most powerful and influential NGOs that have been irritating the Kremlin for years with their investigations that reveal gross abuses of power, corruption and violations of human rights.

The first to fall under the heel of the authorities was the Golos election-monitoring organization. Golos published conclusive evidence of massive fraud during the 2011 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections. Now the authorities are taking their revenge against the country's only effective tool for fighting electoral fraud. Golos has refused to label itself as a "foreign agent" and will very probably be forced to cease operations.

The Memorial foundation, founded with support from legendary human rights activist Andrei Sakharov and former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, has also been served a warning by the authorities. Memorial documents crimes that were committed by the Soviet regime and assists victims of human rights abuse in the North Caucasus and other areas. The Federal Security Service, which is likely behind the attacks, wants to silence Memorial, which has exposed the crimes of the KGB and today's FSB, an agency that continues to worship the Red Terror's henchman, Felix Dzerzhinsky, whose portrait still hangs in dozens of FSB offices.

Among the organizations that the authorities are attempting to stigmatize as "foreign agents" are well-known and respected NGOs like Transparency International, which fights corruption; Agora, which provides legal assistance to protesters wrongfully imprisoned for participating in the protest march on Bolotnaya Ploshchad; and even the Levada Center, which conducts polls.

"Foreign agent" is a term taken directly from the Stalinist era, when the authorities induced mass paranoia by claiming that the country was "surrounded by enemies." To agree to be considered a "foreign agent" is to sew a yellow star on your shirt or coat, to acknowledge that you have committed some horrible crime of treason and deserve to be an outcast in society. The repressive NGO law was a key component of the Kremlin's propaganda campaign that whipped up fear and hatred of everything foreign and of both external and internal enemies.

President Vladimir Putin tries to explain that the government is not prohibiting NGO activity, but only wants to know where their sources of financing are coming from. But that question was answered long ago. NGOs have submitted accounting reports on all income from both domestic and foreign sources since the mid-2000s. In practice, though, NGOs would rather

shut their doors than humiliate themselves and tarnish their reputations by labeling themselves as "foreign agents." And that is precisely what this law was designed to accomplish.

The state pogrom against NGOs will affect not only polling agencies, human rights activists, independent elections observers and corruption-fighters. Despite assurances to the contrary, the NGO law has also been applied to harass organizations that protect children and used against groups that work in the fields of education, health care and environmental protection.

The Prosecutor General's Office and Justice Ministry are sending official warnings out to every NGO that receives any money at all from abroad. The second criterion by which they are branded as "foreign agents" is if they are deemed to engage in "political activity." The siloviki have no trouble proving that claim because the definition of political activity is interpreted so loosely as to include practically everything. The Agora NGO has already listed 50 types of activities commonly carried out by NGOs that the authorities classify as "political" in nature. Practically everything that benefits society in some way is included, from treating childhood illnesses to working to keep lakes and rivers clean.

Civil society is beginning to realize the scale of the unfolding disaster. The Presidential Council on Human Rights has appealed to Putin to repeal the law or to urgently introduce mitigating amendments to it.

But there is little hope. The Russian state cynically speaks about the need for modernization and a strong civil society, while it works methodically to destroy its very foundation.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvyy radio and is a co-founder of the opposition RP-Party of People's Freedom.

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