

Prosecutor General Aggressively Defends NGO Searches

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Prosecutor General Yury Chaika on Wednesday spoke to the Federation Council about recent searches of hundreds of NGOs in the country, dismissing criticism of the searches as "groundless" and announcing that over 500 violations were discovered in the groups' activities.

Chaika also echoed warnings by President Vladimir Putin by speaking in ominous tones about the potential foreign influence being wielded by such groups, saying that prosecutors had uncovered 17 Russian NGOs that have received funding through embassies and that four representatives of foreign-funded NGOs were on the Kremlin human rights council, "through which they attempt to influence the authorities."

The prosecutor general spoke to senators a day after discussing the searches of NGOs with Putin, whom he told that 215 nongovernmental organizations had bypassed a recent law on foreign funding by refusing to register themselves as "foreign agents."

Parliament in November passed that controversial law, which requires all groups that receive foreign funding and engage in vaguely defined "political activity" to register as "foreign agents," a term that carries Cold War connotations of spying. Critics have said the definition of political activity is so loose that it could be used against almost any NGO.

Prosecutors have searched the offices of as many as 2,000 NGOs across the country, while 36 groups have had legal action brought against them, according to Agora, a group that provides legal assistance to other NGOs and is itself one of the 36.

In the Federation Council on Wednesday, Chaika defended the searches as planned actions — although many NGOs said they received no notice before authorities arrived at their offices — aimed at verifying compliance with the new legislation.

"These accusations, including from a range of media outlets, are absolutely groundless. These [were] planned checks," Chaika said, according to Interfax. "We wanted to monitor the situation with NGOs after the passage of a law regulating their activities."

"As a result of this inspection, more than 500 violations of NGO law were discovered," Chaika said.

At his meeting Tuesday with Putin, Chaika said the searches uncovered 215 NGOs that "in our opinion" should register as foreign agents, even though most of them stopped receiving foreign funding after the bill was passed.

Chaika also decried attempts by some NGOs, including Agora and election monitor Golos, to "dodge the law" and urged the groups to comply. Golos was fined 300,000 rubles (about \$10,000) in April in the first penalty imposed under the law.

Grigory Melkonyants, Golos' deputy executive director, said Tuesday that the board of Golos in June decided to discontinue the organization in order to avoid legal complications. Golos members have set up a new NGO that will run their projects, Melkonyants said. They also will set up a separate fund that will handle the donations, he said.

Putin has been distrustful of foreign-funded NGOs and has accused the U.S. State Department of funding Russian nonprofit groups with the aim of undermining his government.

Chaika's comments came less than a week after Putin sided with rights activists who want the law amended to make NGOs that do not engage in politics exempt from it. Several Russian officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich, have indicated that the law could be amended that way.

Pavel Chikov, head of Agora, said Tuesday that most of the recent legal action taken against Russian NGOs was related to funding received before the law was adopted.

Regarding the funding of groups by foreign embassies, Chikov said dozens of embassies had funded projects run by Russian NGOs in the past two decades. He said this was "an absolutely legal source of funding" in Russia, and the government had never banned it.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

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