

Public Chamber Report Says Russians Don't Want More Human Rights NGOs

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russians would like to see nongovernmental organizations provide more help for socially vulnerable groups but aren't interested in an increase in human rights advocacy, the Public Chamber said in a report.

Russia has roughly 100,000 registered "socially oriented NGOs," but only 5 percent of them are "really active," a draft report published on the chamber's website said.

Many Russians would like to see more of those groups, and have little interest in human rights organizations, the report said.

The chamber itself did not call for restricting human rights groups.

It said that polls showed that "in the view of Russian citizens, the activities of NGOs must focus primarily on solving acute social problems" — such as helping children, people with

severe illnesses and disabilities, and environmental protection — while "human rights groups and those engaged in the preservation of the cultural heritage are in the least demand."

"I am very much surprised by the thesis about the surplus of watchdog NGOs," a member of the Kremlin's human right council, Yelena Topoleva-Soldunova said, Novye Izvestia reported. "They should not be contrasted with socially oriented ones — they themselves are concerned with social issues as opposed to, for example, professional associations or state corporations."

The push for more apolitical charitable groups at the expense of potential critics of the government was also reflected in the Justice Ministry's proposal last week to ban nongovernmental organizations recognized as "foreign agents" from sending observers to monitor conditions in Russia's prisons.

Deputy Justice Minister Dmitry Aristov told a meeting with the Kremlin's human rights council that registration as a "foreign agent" should be officially listed as grounds for denying a nongovernmental organization the right to nominate its representatives to "public monitoring groups," Itar-Tass reported. Charitable organizations would still be allowed to visit prisons, he added.

Rights advocates said that the proposal contradicted the spirit of the already much-disputed law on "foreign agents," which was supposedly intended to inform the public, not to restrict any activities.

"When the law on 'foreign agent' NGOs was adopted, we were told that it wouldn't create any restrictions on the organizations' activities, but was only a means of informing society," a member of the presidential human rights council, Andrei Babushkin said.

The deputy justice minister said that he saw no contradiction.

"The government has institutions where any kinds of political activity is prohibited," Aristov said. "This includes not only penitentiary institutions, but also military units."

The law, adopted a year ago, requires nongovernmental organizations that receive funding from abroad and are involved in political activities to register as "foreign agents" — a term that is often used as synonymous to "spy" in Russian.

The Public Chamber report made no mention of "foreign agent" NGOs.

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