

Russia searches hundreds of rights groups, NGOs
By Max Seddon, AP
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MOSCOW — Russian prosecutors on Thursday searched the offices of Memorial, one of the country's oldest and most respected human rights groups, as part of a new, wide-ranging campaign targeting hundreds of nongovernmental organizations.

Up to 2,000 organizations have already been searched, Pavel Chikov, a member of the presidential human rights council, told The Associated Press, saying the scale of the government campaign was unprecedented.

"It goes full circle across the whole spectrum," Chikov said. "They're trying to find as many violations as possible."

He said the prosecutor general's office ordered every region in Russia last month to check all religious, political and social NGOs for violations of Russia's vaguely worded "extremism" law. The law is ostensibly intended to target violent neo-Nazi groups, but has been used against things as wide-ranging as Scientologists and the TV show "South Park," as well as to stamp out dissent.

News website Gazeta.ru cited a prosecutor in St. Petersburg as saying all 5,000 NGOs in the city would be searched.

Members of the rights council sent a letter Thursday to Russia's prosecutor general, saying it has been flooded in recent days with complaints from NGOs, and asking for an explanation.

President Vladimir Putin has long been suspicious of NGOs, especially those with foreign funding, which he has accused of being fronts for Western governments to meddle in Russia's political affairs. After Putin's return to the presidency last year, parliament passed a law requiring all nongovernmental organizations with foreign funding that engage in political activities to register as "foreign agents," a loaded term conjuring past Soviet spy mania.

The Justice Ministry, however, has said the law is unenforceable.

The human rights council said the searches have been carried out by prosecutors; agents of the FSB, the main successor to the KGB; and also by tax and fire inspectors who have nothing to do with enforcing the extremism law.

"Really fighting extremism and trying to scare law-abiding NGOs staff is not the same thing," the council letter said.

On Thursday, prosecutors turned up without notice at the Moscow offices of Memorial, an organization that researches rights abuses, and demanded documents pertaining to all of its activities. They were accompanied by tax inspectors and journalists from a Kremlin-friendly TV channel.

"This is the result of a directive from the very top, from Mr. Putin personally, to go and deal with all the NGOs that are too independent," Memorial director Oleg Orlov said.

Memorial is one of about 60 Russian organizations that had depended on funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development. This funding dried up after Russia kicked USAID out of the country last year, but the U.S. made clear that it was not abandoning its support for these organizations. © AP