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NGO Memorial Avoids 'Foreign Agent' Tag

By The Moscow Times

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A St. Petersburg court has ruled that the city's branch of the nongovernmental organization Memorial does not have to register as a "foreign agent" in a decision that could impact upon other NGOs hit with the same charges.

Prosecutors said that the organization received foreign financing and engaged in political activities, and was therefore required to register as a foreign agent with the Justice Ministry in accordance with a contentious law that came into force in November, Kommersant reported.

The organization, founded in Moscow in 1989, collects and publishes information on repression in CIS countries but also about abuses in the Soviet Union, particularly in gulags in the Stalin era. The group was instrumental in the successful campaign to place a stone memorial to gulag victims at Lubyanskaya Ploshchad in Moscow.

Prosecutors said Memorial's presentation to the UN committee against torture, "Gypsies, migrants, activists: victims of police arbitrariness," which criticized the Interior Ministry for pressuring various minority groups. An administrative report said that Memorial's actions "defamed the honor and image of law enforcement employees."

However, the court ruled that this activity did not constitute a breach of the rules governing NGOs.

The NGO's chairwoman, Stefania Kulayeva, said she hoped that the victory would help other organizations in the same situation. She added that a clear signal had been sent to other courts telling them that they should be more discerning in deciding what constitutes political activity.

Though the case was dismissed, prosecutors have until July 30 to appeal the decision.

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