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Perm NGO Cleared Over Refusal to Register as 'Foreign Agent'

By The Moscow Times

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A court in Perm has ruled not to punish a local nongovernmental organization for refusing to register as a "foreign agent."

Prosecutors had asked the court to find the NGO, Grany Center, guilty of violating the controversial law passed in November that requires all groups that receive foreign funding and engage in "political activity" to register with the Justice Ministry.

However, the judge dismissed the administrative case due to an absence of any wrongdoing on the part of Grany, the NGO told Interfax.

Grany, the Center for Civic Analysis and Independent Study, was established in 2007 and is chiefly concerned with uniting the work of state and civil organizations to find solutions to social problems. It also carries out research into the activities of powerful organizations, state-owned or otherwise.

A St. Petersburg court Wednesday threw out a request for a local NGO called Memorial to register. Prosecutors had accused Memorial of criticizing the Interior Ministry for pressuring minority groups and said that it was therefore engaged in political activity.

Memorial'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. The news from Perm could indicate that the idea is catching on.

On the same day, the court in Perm also acquitted the Perm Civic Chamber — another NGO that had refused to register.

Perm Civic Chamber's representative said the court turned down the prosecution's request to fine the organization 400,000 rubles ($12,300) because it had not found any violations of the law in its work.

Following an inspection in Perm, located on the foothills of the Ural mountains, prosecutors told several local human rights organizations, including the Perm Civic Chamber, to register as "foreign agents," a term that carries connotations of spying. But, like the vast majority of Russian NGOs, it ignored the order.

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