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Russian Human Rights Council Attempts to Scrap Fines for 'Foreign Agent' NGOs

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A lecture at the Memorial human rights organization, one of 13 NGOs registered as "foreign agents" by the Justice Ministry since July.

The Presidential Human Rights Council has prepared amendments to a controversial law that would stop nongovernmental organizations being fined for failing to register as "foreign agents," Kommersant reported Tuesday.

A law introduced by the government in 2012 requires NGOs that receive funding from abroad and are engaged in loosely defined political activity to register as "foreign agents" with the Justice Ministry.

Under the initial law, NGOs had to register themselves voluntarily or face a fine, but as no established nonprofit organizations opted to do so, citing the negative connotations of the term "foreign agents," amendments were passed allowing the Justice Ministry to put organizations on the list unilaterally.

The ministry has already registered 13 organizations since July, when the amendments were

passed, including some of Russia's best-known civil society groups such as St. Petersburg's Soldiers' Mothers, the Memorial rights organization, the Golos election monitoring group and others.

Under the current law the organizations can still be fined up to 300,000 rubles ($8,000) or face up to two years imprisonment for the organization's head if they fail to register as foreign agents themselves.

Since the July amendments were passed, one organization — Women of Don — has already been fined, the council's head Mikhail Fedotov told Kommersant.

According to the newspaper, the Justice Ministry has yet not received the amendments drafted by the Human Rights Council, but is prepared to consider them "under established procedure."

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