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Human Rights Heavyweights Slam Russian Government's Move to Close Memorial NGO

By Allison Quinn

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Veteran human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva has added her voice to those decrying the Russian government's move to close down the Memorial human rights group, saying its closure would send shockwaves through the international community.

"As soon as I heard this terrible news, that they are planning to basically shut down Russia's Memorial, I immediately said it was insane. I don't think it will happen," Alexeyeva, who is head of the Moscow Helsinki Group, was quoted as saying by RIA Novosti.

"I don't think I'm exaggerating at all [to say this move would be a shock] because Memorial is internationally recognized. It is an organization that has earned world renown. It would be an international shock if they tried to shut down such an organization," Alexeyeva said.

Earlier this month, the Justice Ministry requested that the Supreme Court close the well-

known NGO for alleged legal violations, eliciting alarm among many activists, who see the move as part of a wider Kremlin crackdown on civil society.

The ministry's claim against the organization appears to stem from a technical violation involving the group's organizational structure.

Memorial is comprised of various groups across the country that work in human rights, historical research and philanthropy. The group lacks a central office to oversee all of its operations, however, and the ministry has apparently deemed this to be a violation.

Critics have said the timing of the ministry's decision is suspicious, following the NGO's criticism of the Russian government's policies in Ukraine.

Lev Ponomaryov, one of the organization's founders, described Memorial on Wednesday as "something Russia should be proud of ... a national achievement," RIA Novosti reported.

He said that the ministry's complaints against the organization were purely bureaucratic, and that the move to liquidate Memorial should be stopped.

The president of the European Parliament has also sent a letter to the Russian government asking the Justice Ministry to not liquidate Memorial, RIA reported.

Martin Schulz, the parliament's president, told reporters that the parliament considered it "completely unacceptable" for Memorial to come under threat from the Russian government, pointing out that the NGO continues the legacy of its co-founder, Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, after whom the parliament named its Sakharov Prize.

"We have supported this NGO for years," Schulz was cited by reporters as saying.

Memorial has gained international recognition for its work in the field of human rights and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by the European Parliament last year.
The organization dates back to the 1980s, when it was set up by Soviet dissidents to preserve the legacy of the victims of Stalinist repression.

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