The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian NGO Perm-36 Could Be Labeled 'Foreign Agent'

By Anna Dolgov

April 23, 2015



The fence and guard tower at the Soviet forced labor camp Perm-36 100 kilometers northeast of the city of Perm in Russia.

A non-governmental organization that operated a museum commemorating victims of the Gulag may be branded a "foreign agent" despite having decided to fold, a news report said Wednesday.

Justice Ministry officials have found that the work of the NGO Perm-36, which operated a museum under the same name on the site of a former Gulag camp, carried signs of "political activity," and that the group received foreign funding, Interfax reported Wednesday.

These two attributes make a group required to register as a "foreign agent" under a vaguely worded Russian law, which has slapped NGOs with the charged label that was synonymous with "spy" during the Soviet era.

The NGO announced in March that it would shut down following a state takeover of the museum last fall. Perm-36 had been in existence for more than 20 years, and the camp it renovated and maintained as a museum and memorial complex had been nominated for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

A spokesperson for Perm-36 said the group would appeal the Justice Ministry decision, Interfax reported.

The ministry began investigating whether Perm-36 should be labeled a "foreign agent" last month, after a group of citizens wrote to say the group should be investigated, Interfax reported. The probe was completed this week.

In a separate investigation, employees of the NGO found police seizing the archives of the Perm-36 museum and locking down the building, Interfax reported.

"They said that the archives were sealed off by police based on a petition of some person, who asked to look into our activity," the NGO's director, Tatyana Kursina, said.

Investigations based on anonymous complaints were a trademark of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's purges, whose victims the Perm-36 museum sought to commemorate.

Regional authorities who took over the museum after it was pressured into folding intend to use the site as a memorial to the Soviet penal system with no mention of political prisoners and Stalin-era repression, museum director Viktor Shmyrov has told the BBC Russian Service.

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