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Russian Justice Ministry Report on NGO Memorial Heads to Court

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The Justice Ministry report accusing the rights group Memorial of "undermining the constitutional order and calling for the overthrow of the Russian government," following the ministry's inspection of the NGO's activities and dated Oct. 30, has been sent to a magistrates' court in Moscow's Tverskoy district, the RIA Novosti news agency reported Friday.

The ministry alleged that the organization's statute was in breach of Russian law; a protocol of administrative violation was also drawn up which said that Memorial had failed to submit all necessary documents for inspection.

Memorial board chairman and co-founder Arseny Roginsky wrote a letter to Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov on Thursday, urging him to review the case and revoke the accusations, according to a copy of the letter posted on Memorial's website.

In particular, Roginsky rejected the report's claims that the NGO had been "calling for the overthrow of the current government and for changing the country's political regime," which — according to Kommersant — referred to Memorial's criticism of the conflict in Ukraine and of sentences dealt out to activists involved in the Bolotnaya Square protests in May 2012.

"Such [inspection reports] damage not only the civil society organizations which they target. They undermine trust in your ministry, and more importantly, in the constitution. This is dangerous," Roginsky said in the letter.

The group was previously put on a list of organizations labelled as "foreign agents." The term, which in Russian is strongly suggestive of cold-war era espionage, is applied to civil society groups receiving foreign donations and deemed to engage in loosely defined "political activity."

A working group under Russia's presidential administration has vowed to clarify what should be regarded as political activity, following criticism from the presidential human rights council that said the term should not encompass "the shaping of public opinion," the Kommersant newspaper said in a separate report Friday.

According to Kommersant, officials from the justice ministry have recently proposed that the "foreign agent" law be amended, and the term rephrased as "NGOs pursuing political goals."

In the same report, Kommersant wrote that the presidential administration is presently engaged in a review of NGO legislation, and has recently laid out the eligibility conditions for tax breaks and donations from the state budget.

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