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Russia Bans Church of Scientology With 'Undesirable' Tag

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Sergey Fadeichev / TASS

Russia has designated the Church of Scientology an "undesirable organization" Friday, effectively banning it within the country and putting its members at risk of jail time.

Russia has previously attempted to prohibit the Church of Scientology, a religion that is recognized in some countries but considered by others to be a cult, since it arrived in the country. Tens of thousands of people across Russia are estimated to be members.

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The Prosecutor General's Office said it labeled the Los Angeles-headquartered World Institute of Scientology Enterprises as well as the Church of Spiritual Technology (L. Ron Hubbard Library) after finding that they "pose a threat to the security of the Russian Federation."

As Russia's relations with the West have soured in recent years, the battle against Scientology

as a distinctly "foreign" movement that poses a threat to Russian cultural values has intensified.

The Church of Scientology's Moscow branch was disbanded in 2015 after a court found that the group had failed to meet the requirements for operating as a recognized religious organization. A St. Petersburg court disbanded that city's branch in 2007 and a number of its materials have been ruled to be extremist in 2011.

Arrests were made in 2016 when police raided the church's offices in Moscow and St. Petersburg in connection with illegal business dealings in Russia's second-largest city.

Authorities continued the Scientology raids in both cities in 2019, alleging that the church may have transferred large sums raised during seminars and training sessions held without a license to its U.S. headquarters.

The Church of Scientology is the latest addition to Russia's list of "undesirable organizations," a registry normally used to crack down on foreign NGOs. All organizations added to the "undesirable" registry are required to disband operations within Russia.

Under the law, participants in "undesirable" groups' activities can be punished by up to four years in prison and organizers can receive up to six years.

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