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Russia Moves to Close Respected Rights Group Memorial

By AFP

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Memorial is Russia's oldest and most respected human rights group. **memohrc.org**

Russian prosecutors are moving to shutter the country's most respected rights group Memorial, it announced Thursday, in the latest legal effort to silence independent voices critical of President Vladimir Putin.

Memorial said it was notified by Russia's Supreme Court that prosecutors had filed a demand to dissolve the group over systematic violations of "foreign agent" legislation.

Related article: Moscow Human Rights Group Stormed During Holodomor Film Screening

The group is among several investigative news outlets, journalists and rights organizations to have been hit with the label in what observers have described as a historic crackdown on independent organizations.

Memorial said there was "no legal basis" for the case, saying it had been accused of failing to identify itself publically as a designated foreign agent.

"This is a political decision aimed at destroying the Memorial Society, an organization dedicated to the history of political repression and the protection of human rights."

"We have repeatedly stated that the law was originally conceived as a tool to crack down on independent organizations, and insisted that it should be abolished," Memorial said in a statement.

A hearing is scheduled for Nov. 25 at 11:00 a.m. Moscow time according to the court website.

A term with Soviet-era undertones, the status forces individuals or organizations to disclose sources of funding and label all their publications, including social media posts, with a tag or face fines.

Memorial said late last month that the number of political prisoners in Russia had risen sharply in recent years in a trend that recalls late Soviet-era repression.

It listed at least 420 political prisoners, including top Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny who survived a poisoning attempt with Novichok nerve agent last year, compared to 46 in 2015.

Russia earlier this week declared the country's main group defending LGBTQ rights a foreign agent as well as several lawyers close to the Russian opposition.

Putin himself said that the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Russian newspaper editor Dmitry Muratov would not "shield" him from being branded a foreign agent if he breaks the law.

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