The Moscow Times
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Closing Russian NGO Memorial Would Be 'Devastating Blow' – Council of Europe

By AFP

November 12, 2021



A graffiti message reading "Foreign agent. Love USA" at the entrance to the offices of human rights group Memorial, in central Moscow. **Sergei Karpov / TASS**

Closing down respected Russian rights group Memorial would deal a "devastating blow" to civil society in the country, the secretary-general of pan-European rights body the Council of Europe said Friday.

The closure of "Memorial would deal a further devastating blow to civil society, which is an essential pillar of any democracy," said Marija Pejcinovic Buric, calling on Russian prosecutors to reconsider a move announced Thursday to close it down.

Memorial, Russia's oldest rights group, 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: Russia Moves to Close Respected Rights Group Memorial

A term with Soviet-era undertones, the "foreign agent" 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, which has been regularly cited as a potential Nobel Peace Prize winner but never won, campaigns for the preservation of historical memory in Russia and against rights violations especially in the northern Caucasus region.

Buric described the move by the Russian prosecutors as "very regrettable."

She slammed the "foreign agent" status rule, saying "this law stigmatizes NGOs, media, and individuals and has had a repressive impact on civil society in Russia over recent years."

Memorial on Thursday 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."

A hearing about the prosecutor's case is scheduled for Nov. 25 at 11:00 a.m. Moscow time, according to the court website.

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