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Moscow Court Begins Hearings on Closing Top Rights Center

By Romain Colas for AFP

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Lawyers and the press at the Moscow City Court. **t.me/polnyipc**

A court in Moscow on Tuesday began hearings into a request by prosecutors to shut down a key center of Russia's leading rights group Memorial.

Dozens of supporters of Memorial gathered in frigid weather outside the Moscow City Court for the first of two court hearings this week on efforts to shutter the group, created in 1989 to catalogue Soviet-era crimes.

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Founded by Soviet dissidents including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov, Memorial was a symbol of Russia's democratization efforts in the 1990s and is one of the biggest pillars of civil society.

The pressure on the group comes in a year that has seen an unprecedented crackdown on Russia's opposition and independent media, with authorities imprisoning top Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in February and banning his organizations.

Tuesday's preliminary hearing was in connection with a request by prosecutors to close Memorial's Moscow-based Human Rights Center, which campaigns for the rights of political prisoners, migrants and other disadvantaged groups.

Prosecutors accuse the center of violating Russia's law on "foreign agents" and of justifying "terrorism and extremism" by releasing lists of political prisoners that include banned figures like Navalny and members of outlawed groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Memorial said its lawyers put forward several motions during the closed-door hearing, including that it be opened to the public and press, while prosecutors submitted their written case.

Another preliminary hearing was scheduled for Nov. 29, when Memorial said it would present its written position.

'Cannot destroy history'

Supporters outside the courthouse urged authorities not to go through with the ban.

"You cannot destroy history because then the country will not have a future," said Alla Frolova, a coordinator with OVD-Info, a protest monitoring group that works with Memorial.

Memorial is due back before judges on Thursday in another case at Russia's Supreme Court.

Prosecutors have asked the Supreme Court to approve their request for the shuttering of Memorial International, which focuses on efforts to remember victims of Soviet-era persecution.

Memorial International is also accused of violating the "foreign agents" law, which forces individuals or organizations to disclose sources of funding and label all their publications with a tag or face fines.

The term is laden with Soviet-era connotations of treachery and espionage.

Memorial's Human Rights Center was put on the government's register of "foreign agents" in 2014, while Memorial International was added in 2016.

Together the two entities form the core of Memorial's operations.

Ilya Novikov, one of Memorial's lawyers, said the closure of the group would once have been unimaginable.

"If we fell from the moon and arrived from 2000, we could probably say that this is a farce," he said. But, he added, "this is the reality of 2021."

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman said the Kremlin would not comment at this stage.

"This topic does not figure prominently on the agenda for the Kremlin and the president," Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"At this point, there is the position of the prosecution, and there's still no court decision."

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