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Russian Anti-Torture NGO Disbands After Foreign Label

By AFP

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Sergei Anisimov / RFE / RL

The head of the Russian Committee for the Prevention of Torture said Sunday he had disbanded the organisation after it was branded a "foreign agent" by authorities, a label he called an "insult."

"We don't want to continue working by being labeled 'foreign agents.' We consider this term an insult and slander," Sergei Babinets said on Telegram, adding that the dissolution of the NGO was decided by its members on Saturday.

"Despite the obvious importance of our mission, the authorities have been trying for many years to portray it as foreign and harmful," he said.

"The authorities are sending a signal that torture is becoming (or has already become) a part of government policy."

The Committee for the Prevention of Torture, founded in 2000, campaigns to compel authorities to investigate mistreatment by security forces and take steps to stop it.

Its work has included the situation in Chechnya.

Already branded a "foreign agent" in 2015 and again in 2016, the organization decided to dissolve itself before reforming to try to shake off the designation.

The label "foreign agent," reminiscent of the Soviet-era "enemy of the people," is used heavily against organisations, the political opposition and journalists accused of carrying out foreign-funded political activities.

"Foreign agents" are subject to numerous constraints and tedious procedures, or they face heavy penalties.

They must indicate their status in all publications.

The Committee for the Prevention of Torture's dissolution comes amid a merciless crackdown on critical voices in Russia, particularly since the launch of the military intervention in Ukraine in late February.

Since then, many NGOs have been banned.

In April, Russian authorities shut down the offices of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

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