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Moscow Labels Dozens of Indigenous Groups, Free Russia Foundation as 'Extremist'

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Alexandra Garmazhapova, President of the Free Buryatia Foundation. **A.Savin**

Authorities in Moscow have added an unprecedented 54 Indigenous groups and the U.S.-based Free Russia Foundation to the country's growing list of "extremist" organizations.

Russia's Justice Ministry labeled the 55 seemingly unrelated organizations as "structural divisions" of the vaguely defined "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement," which Russia's Supreme Court banned as an "extremist" organization last month. Rights groups have said the authorities could use the designation as a pretext for the criminal prosecution of anti-war, anti-colonial or Indigenous rights activists.

The new list of 55 "extremist" groups includes the Asians of Russia and Free Buryatia foundations, the Free Ingria movement, the Sakha Pacifist Association community and the World Chechen Congress.

In the listing, the Justice Ministry described the "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement" as seeking to "destroy the multinational unity and territorial integrity of" the country. The "extremist" designation means anyone convicted of association with the vaguely defined organization could be imprisoned for up to six years.

"I can't say that this was a surprise," said Alexandra Garmazhapova, the head of the Free Buryatia Foundation.

"When the Supreme Court declared the non-existent 'Anti-Russian Separatist Movement' extremist, I said that this decision was made against ethnic anti-war movements, and most likely we would be the first [to get targeted]," Garmazhapova told The Moscow Times.

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Garmazhapova said the decision would have little effect on the day-to-day work of the foundation, which Russian authorities earlier labeled as a "foreign agent" and "undesirable" organization.

"We already restructured our work after we were designated an 'undesirable' organization," she explained. "It is a very toxic status and no matter how brave we try to appear, it is difficult... [because] people are scared to talk to us."

"As for me personally, I will simply continue collecting criminal cases, which will undoubtedly be dismissed as soon as the entire criminal regime collapses," said Garmazhapova, who was sentenced to seven years in prison in absentia for spreading "war fakes" last year.

But some organizations say being included in the list caught them by surprise.

"We had neither a 'foreign agent' nor 'undesirable' designation before, and now we are suddenly labeled as extremists," an activist from the Independent Sakha Movement told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

"We took every precaution to avoid being labeled as a foreign agent: we kept a low profile and did not give any interviews. We are a very small public page with just a thousand followers; do they [the Kremlin] really see us as a threat?"

Also among the organizations targeted on Friday was the Free Russia Foundation, which described the "extremist" designation as "part of a broader pattern of repression targeting independent voices and organizations that challenge Putin's regime narrative."

"This designation is a clear attempt to intimidate and silence those who stand up for democratic values and human rights in Russia," the organization said in a statement. "However, FRF remains committed to its mission of supporting the Russian people in their pursuit of a free and democratic society."

The Free Russia Foundation, which was also previously labeled as an "undesirable" organization, vowed to "pursue all legal avenues to respond to the 'extremist' designation."

“We will work to challenge this status and ensure that the rights of all individuals and organizations advocating for democratic values are respected,” it said.

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