

Justice Ministry Shuts Down St. Pete Rights Group

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St. Petersburg-based human rights organization ADC Memorial on Friday became the first major Russian nongovernmental organization to be liquidated for refusing to register as a "foreign agent" with the Justice Ministry.

With its disbandment of ADC Memorial, the ministry has taken a major step beyond the mere suspension of activities of prominent NGOs.

ADC Memorial's liquidation coincided with State Duma deputy Andrei Lugovoi's proposed amendments to the "foreign agent" law on Friday that would further limit the scope of NGOs' activities and allow the Justice Ministry to decide for itself which noncommercial organizations should be deemed "foreign agents." The current legislation adopted in 2012 requires NGOs to register themselves as "foreign agents" if they receive foreign funding and engage in what the Kremlin considers to be political activity.

ADC Memorial, which set out to tackle xenophobia, anti-discrimination and minority rights, found itself in hot water with St. Petersburg's Leninsky District Court in late 2013 for its report "Roma, Migrants, Activists: Victims of Police Abuse." The court claimed the report was meant to "influence decisions of state authorities, change their policies and influence public opinion." ADC Memorial had distributed its work to the Russian delegation of the United Nations Committee Against Torture in November 2012.

Tanya Lokshina, the Russia program director at Human Rights Watch, said that the court's objection to the report was nothing more than an excuse to close down the organization.

"Although the prosecution based its case on the report it is clear that it not only had a problem with this report, but also with the existence of this human rights organization," Lokshina told The Moscow Times on Friday.

International human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and the International Federation for Human Rights, have denounced the repression of Russian civil society organizations and the liquidation of ADC Memorial. Lokshina said the NGO's closure represents a "colossal loss" for the country.

ADC Memorial is just one of the Memorial movement's human rights and charity organizations, which are active throughout the former Soviet Union, as well as in Germany, France and Italy. Founded in 1989, Memorial works to preserve the memory of political repression in former Soviet republics and advocates for human rights throughout the region.

Since early March, the Justice Ministry has filed nine administrative cases against NGOs and five administrative cases against NGO leaders for failing to register as "foreign agents."

Nearly all NGOs have refused to register as "foreign agents" since the controversial law's passing in 2012, fearing political persecution for having a label that suggests involvement in espionage. A number of NGOs have already been fined for refusing to register.

Other Russian NGOs such as Golos, an electoral monitoring group, have been indefinitely suspended for violating the "foreign agent" legislation but have not been officially liquidated.

During last year's NGOs inspection campaign that led to the suspension of Golos, Prosecutor General Yury Chaika said the Justice Ministry's objective was to ensure compliance with the "foreign agent" law and not to liquidate the country's NGOs.

Despite such reassurances, ADC Memorial's liquidation has stoked alarm among other rights organizations.

According to the International Federation for Human Rights, ADC Memorial's case was mishandled. The judge that presided over the proceedings repeatedly interrupted the NGO's lawyers, preventing the defense from presenting its case.

The president of the International Federation for Human Rights, Karim Lahidji, released a statement in early April that described the prosecution's decision as "further evidence of the constant judicial harassment faced by ADC Memorial, amid highly politicized proceedings where the judges and the prosecutor have been implementing orders from above."

Earlier this month, Russia's Constitutional Court ruled that complaints about the unconstitutional nature of the country's law on “foreign agents” were unfounded. The Constitutional Court said the “foreign agent” label requirement was a means to promote transparency within NGOs and that it did not interfere with their activities.

“The Constitutional Court's decision was met with great disappointment by the country's NGO community,” Lokshina said. “ADC Memorial’s lawyers will bring their case to the European Court of Human Rights. But this will take lots of time, and we do not know when a decision will be made.”

Read more:

[Human Rights Group to Close Over 'Foreign Agent' Label](#)

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