

Russian Center Honoring Victims of Soviet Regime Branded 'Foreign Agent'

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Members of the Andrei Sakharov Center discuss Russia's parliamentary elections.

Russia's Justice Ministry has slapped the menacing "foreign agent" label on the Andrei Sakharov Center, a group dedicated to defending human rights and preserving the legacy of dissidents and victims of Soviet repressions.

The ministry also added two other organizations to its "foreign agent" list: the Kaliningrad-based Human Rights Center and a college alumni association in the Krasnodar region, the ministry said in a statement Thursday.

A recent Russian law requires non-governmental organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in vaguely defined political activities to register as "foreign agents."

The legislation has drawn heated criticism from human rights activists, not the least because the term "foreign agent" was used as a synonym for "spy" during the Soviet Union.

Andrei Sakharov, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning physicist for whom the center is named, was himself maligned during his lifetime for supposedly serving foreign interests in his criticism of the Soviet Union's human rights abuses.

A 1973 open letter signed by 40 Soviet academicians, which is widely considered to have marked the start of the government smear campaign against him, accused Sakharov of "stooping to criticize the policy of the Soviet Union toward defusing international tensions."

"Sakharov has effectively become a weapon of hostile propaganda against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries," the letter said.

The persecution led to Sakharov's exile to Nizhny Novgorod, then known as Gorky, in 1980. When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev freed Sakharov in 1986, he asked the physicist during a telephone call to come back to Moscow and "return to your patriotic affairs," according to Sakharov's memoirs.

The Sakharov Center in Moscow received a notification from the Justice Ministry earlier this month saying that government officials intended to hold an "unscheduled inspection" to verify whether the organization was "serving the functions of a foreign agent," the rights group said in a statement, quoting the ministry letter.

The inquiry followed two previous inspections on suspicion of "foreign agent" activities, one in 2013 and one this fall, during which government inspectors found no violations, the statement said.

"Over the past years, the scope and nature of our organization's activity have remained unchanged," the Sakharov Center said. "But today in our country one should be ready for any eventuality."

In an echo of the Soviet practice of launching investigations based on anonymous reports from "concerned citizens," the Justice Ministry's letter said that the latest inspection was based on a report from "a citizen who had prohibited disclosing his personal information."

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