



Protect “Memorial”: Stop the Attack on Russian Civil Society

Statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

In recent days, Russian civil society has come under a new wave of pressure from the authorities. Increasingly, repressive measures are being used not only against independent NGOs but also against individuals.

On 11 November 2021, Russian authorities initiated the liquidation of two prominent Russian human rights organisations – International Memorial¹ and the Human Rights Centre (HRC) “Memorial”². The Prosecutor General's Office filed a lawsuit to liquidate International Memorial, and the Moscow Prosecutor's Office filed a similar lawsuit regarding the HRC “Memorial”. As their reasoning, the authorities claimed ‘systematic violations of the law on “foreign agents”³.’

This lawsuit is an artful act of intimidation targeted at silencing independent voices in Russia. International Memorial is an important collective memory institute which plays a crucial role in keeping and studying historical memory in Russia, and its member organisation, HRC “Memorial”, focuses on human rights protection, monitoring political and religious persecution, support of political prisoners, migrants and refugees, including those in the North Caucasus. Human Rights Centre “Memorial” became one of the first organisations to be listed in Russia as a “foreign agent” back in 2014, and International Memorial was added to this list in 2016.

Earlier this week, the Russian Ministry of Justice added several natural persons to the list of media “foreign agents”. Maxim Olenichev, Ivan Pavlov, Elena Skvortsova, Valeria Vetoshkina and Maxim Zagovora are former members of “Team 29”, a group of independent lawyers and human rights defenders, established by Pavlov in 2014, dealing with some of the gravest human rights violations, defending activists, political prisoners and other Russian citizens⁴.

On 19 July 2021, “Team 29” announced its dissolving in order to protect its members and clients from possible criminal prosecution. The lawyers promised to continue providing legal representation in their clients’ cases in a private capacity. The decision came after Russia’s Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) blocked “Team 29”’s website for the alleged publication of content produced by “Společnost svobody informace” (Freedom of Information Society), a non-profit organisation based in Prague, that the Russian state had labelled as an “undesirable organisation”⁵ in June 2021.

¹ See https://memohrc.org/en/news_old/russian-prosecutor-generals-office-files-lawsuit-liquidate-international-memorial

² See <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2021/11/12/moskovskaya-prokuratura-podala-isk-o-likvidacii-pravozashchitnogo-centra> (In Russian)

³ To learn more about the recent amendments to the “foreign agents” legislation, see the related statement by the Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum at <https://eu-russia-csf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/StatementNewLegalRestrictionsRussia08.12.2020.pdf>

⁴ See <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7755> (In Russian)

⁵ To learn more about the law on “undesirable organisations”, see the related statement by the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum at <https://eu-russia-csf.org/wp-content/uploads/statements/en/StatementUndesirables05.06.2015.pdf>

Also, this week, the Russian LGBT Network was added to the registry of the unregistered public associations – “foreign agents”⁶, and four days later its founder Igor Kochetkov was added to the list of media “foreign agents” as a natural person⁷. Established in 2006, the Russian LGBT Network became widely prominent in providing legal and psychological assistance and protecting the rights of the LGBT+ community. Some of its most notable activities include the protection of victims against unprecedented prosecution in Chechnya.

Since 2012, when the “foreign agents” law was introduced, a considerable number of organisations focusing on human rights and social issues in different Russian regions, including members and supporters of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, were labelled as such. Dozens of organisations have been forced to close down, which resulted in the denial of important and much needed services to Russian citizens.

The freedom of expression and association, legal certainty, due process and the right to effectively protect human rights are cornerstones of political freedom and democracy. We want to raise our voice against the grave consequences that civil society in general and human rights advocates in particular face as a result of the legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations”. This legislation seriously reduces the possibility to act and express autonomously, to cooperate and share knowledge between individuals, communities at home and in other countries. It creates anxiety and fear. Moreover, it further deteriorates the principle of the rule of law.

The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum strongly condemns the recent decisions taken by the Russian authorities and calls for the quashing this legislation. We also call on European civil society actors, authorities of the European Union and its member states, as well as the institutions of the international community, such as the Council of Europe, to express their solidarity with these organisations and individuals and demand the quashing of these repressive laws.

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⁶ See <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/pages/reestr-nezaregistrirovannyh-obshchestvennyh-obedinenij-vypolnyayushih-funkcii-inostrannogo-agenta/> (In Russian)

⁷ See <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7755> (In Russian)

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