

22 February 2017

Russian Federation: Judicial harassment against human rights organisation SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis

On 21 February 2017, the Basmanniy District Court sentenced the **SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis (SOVA Centre)** to a fine of 300,000 Russian rubles (approximately €4,900) on a charge of neglecting to register as a 'foreign agent' with the Ministry of Justice. The judgement was issued without the presence of representatives from SOVA Centre or the Ministry of Justice.

The SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis is a Moscow-based think tank that was founded in October 2002 with the mission of promoting human rights and liberal democracy through monitoring, advocacy and conducting research. The SOVA Centre works on issues such as nationalism, xenophobia and racism as well as anti-extremism legislation, religion in a secular society, and political radicalism.

On 17 February 2017, the SOVA Centre was notified that on 21 February 2017 the Basmanniy District Court would be considering an administrative case initiated by the Ministry of Justice. The SOVA Centre was accused of neglecting to register as a 'foreign agent'. Before the hearing, representatives from the SOVA Centre and the Ministry of Justice arrived at the Court but were prevented from attending the hearing after being misinformed of the time the hearing was due to begin. Therefore the judgement sentencing the SOVA Centre to a fine of 300,000 Russian rubles was passed without the representatives from either party present in the courtroom. The SOVA Centre will appeal the decision of the Court.

On 12 January 2017, the Ministry of Justice reported that the SOVA Centre neglected to register as a 'foreign agent' with the Ministry of Justice, therefore violating Article 19.34 Part 1 of the Administrative Code of the Russian Federation.

On 30 December 2016, following an inspection, the SOVA Centre was added to the list of non-profit organisations performing the functions of a 'foreign agent.'

On 20 February 2017, the SOVA Centre filed a lawsuit in the Zamoskovoretsky District Court of Moscow against the Ministry of Justice, claiming that the results of the inspection and the inclusion of the centre on the list of 'foreign agents' is unlawful.

The so-called 'Foreign Agents' Law, which was introduced on 21 November 2012, requires non-governmental organisations that conduct 'political activities' and receive funding from abroad to register with the Ministry of Justice as 'foreign agents.' The definition of 'political activities,' in accordance with an amendment accepted by the Russian Parliament in May 2016, includes almost any research or advocacy activities that criticize or challenge the Russian government or its policies. The law is used as a means by Russian authorities to discredit, penalise, or impede the work of non-governmental organisations, especially those working to promote or protect human rights, observe elections and fight for transparency of the state authorities.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the classification of the SOVA Centre as a 'foreign agent', which it believes to be an attempt to prevent the organisation from continuing its legitimate and

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peaceful work in defence of human rights in the Russian Federation.

Front Line Defenders calls on the authorities in the Russian Federation to:

1. Immediately quash the sentence as Front Line Defenders believes that SOVA Centre has been targeted solely as a result of its legitimate human rights work;
2. Repeal the Federal Law №121-FZ, “On Introducing Changes to Certain Pieces of Legislation of the Russian Federation as Regards Regulation of Activities of Non-Commercial Organisations Performing the Functions of Foreign Agents”;
3. Immediately cease all further harassment and targeting of the SOVA Centre;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in the Russian Federation are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

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