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Russia: SOVA Centre facing charges of violating 'Law on Undesirable Organizations'

On 7 September 2017, the **SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis** and its director **Alexander Verkhovsky** were informed that they are facing charges for violating the law on '*undesirable organizations*'.

[The SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis](#) (also known as the 'SOVA Centre') is a Moscow-based think tank founded in October 2002 and promotes human rights and democracy through monitoring, advocacy and research. The SOVA Centre works on issues such as nationalism, xenophobia, racism, freedom of religion as well as anti-extremism legislation.

On 7 September 2017, SOVA Centre director Alexander Verkhovsky appeared at the Moscow City Prosecutor's Office, following a summons received the previous week in connection with the initiation of charges under Article 20.33 of Russia's Code of Administrative Offences. Officials informed Alexander Verkhovsky that he and SOVA Centre were facing charges for violating the 'Law on Undesirable Organizations', which prohibits participation in the activities of foreign organizations defined as '*undesirable*'. The charges are related to hyper-links in the 'About Us' section of the SOVA Centre webpage which acknowledged that the **National Endowment for Democracy and Open Society Foundations** previously supported the SOVA Centre, and provided links to their respective websites. Both organizations were classified as '*undesirable organizations*' and included on the federal register in 2015.

The 'Law on Undesirable Organizations', adopted by Parliament in May 2015, authorizes the Prosecutor General's Office to ban from the country any foreign or international organization that allegedly undermines Russia's security, defence, or constitutional order. Once designated '*undesirable*', an organization can no longer organize or participate in any projects or other activities in the Russian Federation. The law also provides for administrative and criminal sanctions against Russian organizations and nationals that engage in '*continued involvement*' with organizations that are classified as '*undesirable*'. This offence is punishable by a fine of up to 15,000 rubles (approximately 220 euro) for individuals, up to 50,000 rubles (€730) for officials and up to 100,000 rubles (€1,457) for organizations. If found to have violated this law twice in one year, Russian nationals risk criminal prosecution, with fines of up to 500,000 rubles (€7280), restrictions on their activities, travel bans, or a jail sentence of up to six years. The European Commission for Democracy Through Law (the Venice Commission) [found](#) that the 'Law on Undesirable Organizations' interferes with freedom of expression, and should be significantly amended.

This is not the first time that the SOVA Centre has faced [judicial harassment](#) in connection with their work. Previously, On 21 February 2017, the Basmany District Court sentenced the 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 present in the courtroom. 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*'.

Front Line Defenders condemns the charges against the SOVA Centre and Alexander Verkhovsky as

it believes that they are being targeted in connection with the organization's legitimate and 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 drop the charges against, and cease all further harassment of SOVA Centre and its members, as Front Line Defenders believes that they have been targeted solely as a result of their legitimate human rights work;
2. Repeal Article 20.33 of Russia's Code of Administrative Offences;
3. 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.