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Russia: Ministry of Justice moves to shut down Sova Centre

On 20 March 2023, **The SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis (Sova Centre)** [reported](#) that the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation filed a motion to permanently shut down Sova Centre. In January 2023, the Ministry of Justice carried out an unplanned investigation into Sova Centre's activities. Subsequently, on 10 March 2023, the Ministry of Justice filed a motion to permanently shut down Sova Centre, citing the fact that the organisation, which is registered in Moscow, organised events outside of the area in which they are legally allowed to operate, constituting a cause for liquidation. In violation of Russian law, Sova Centre was not notified about either the investigation or the motion to shut the Centre. The organisation plans to legally challenge both actions.

[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 research. The Sova Centre works to document and advocate against nationalism, xenophobia and racism as well as anti-extremism legislation, religion in a secular society, and political radicalism.

On 20 March 2023, Sova Centre [reported](#) that the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation filed a motion to permanently shut down Sova Centre, after it carried out an unplanned investigation into the Sova Centre's activities in the period of January- February 2023. Since the Ministry of Justice failed to inform Sova Centre about the ongoing investigation, on 27 February 2023, the human rights organisation filed a legal motion, asking to invalidate the results of the investigation. The court hearing is scheduled for 30 March 2023.

Despite that, on 10 March 2023, the Ministry of Justice filed a motion to permanently shut down Sova Centre, citing the fact that it organised events outside of Moscow, constituting a terminable offence. According to the Ministry of Justice, since Sova Centre is registered as a "Regional Public Association" it cannot carry out or participate in events that are not happening in the region of the organisation's registration, in this case, Moscow. The report from the Ministry of Justice listed seminars and workshops that Sova Centre carried out outside of Moscow, as well as the international events that Sova Centre representatives attended, including at the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting organised by the OSCE. On 16 November 2022, the Prosecutor's Office in Moscow demanded the Ministry of Justice to carry out an inspection of the Sova Centre. The official request made reference to events that were carried out outside of Moscow as an area in need of special attention.

Sova Centre was targeted on multiple occasions, preceeding the Ministry of Justice's motion to shut down the organisation. On 13 September 2022, Sova Centre was subjected to a defamation campaign, where the organisation was accused of hatred towards the Russian nation, combating traditional values, and was targeted for their critique of the Russian government's use of the anti-extremism laws. After the campaign aired, a Russian pro-governmental initiative, "Veterans of Russia," submitted a request to review the activities of Sova Centre to the Prosecutor General's Office.

The Ministry of Justice's motion to shut down Sova Centre is a yet another move by the Russian Government to eradicate civil society and human rights groups in the country. In 2022, the Ministry of Justice shut down a number of prominent human rights organisations, including Human Rights Centre "Memorial," "Sphere" Foundation, and Russian NGO "Justice Initiative." On 24 January 2023, Moscow City Court moved to shut down the oldest human rights organisation in Russia "Moscow Helsinki Group," citing a similar flawed rhetoric that the Ministry of Justice uses in targeting Sova Centre: engaging in activities (specifically, court monitoring activities) across Russia, despite being registered as a regional organisation. On 30 January 2023, the Ministry of Justice filed a motion to shut down the most prominent human rights organisation in Mari El, "Person and the Law" using a similar argument. On 22 February 2023, The Republican Court of Mari El paused the shut down process, due to the fact that "Person and the Law" contested the results of the Ministry of Justice's investigation in Court. The Ministry of Justice continuously exploits the powers granted by the "foreign agents" law that allows random inspections and checks of the organisations and individuals included in the "foreign agents" list.

Front Line Defenders condemns judicial harassment of Sova Centre by state actors and believes that this harassment is due to the peaceful human rights work of the organisation. Front Line Defenders expresses grave concerns about the continuing systemic targeting of human rights organisations in Russia through inspections and investigations by state actors, as well as through targeting human rights organisations with bogus lawsuits with the aim of shutting them down. Such targeting, places human rights defenders under increased risk and further hampers their peaceful and legitimate human rights work.

Front Line Defenders calls upon the Russian authorities to:

1. Revoke the motion to shut down the SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis;
2. Cease judicial harassment of the SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis for their peaceful and legitimate human rights work;
3. Abolish the discriminatory "foreign agents" law due to its systemic use to target human rights defenders and organisations for their legitimate human rights work;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in the Russian Federation are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with the Russian Federation's international human rights obligations and commitments.