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Russia's prosecutor general's office has declared the nongovernmental organization Open Society Foundation (OSF) to be "undesirable," banning its activities in the country, Human Rights Watch said today. The move is part of a sweeping government crackdown on independent groups, in particular those that challenge the government's human rights record.

A law adopted in May 2015 authorizes the prosecutor's office to ban, as "undesirable," foreign or international organizations that allegedly undermine Russia's security, defense, or constitutional order. For more than two decades, OSF has supported a wide range of initiatives in Russia, including the advancement of science, higher education, human rights, and the rule of law.

"This move against OSF shows the Russian government is moving full steam ahead to close space for independent groups and public debate in Russia," said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "The 'undesirables' law and its implementation have been a terrible blow for civic freedoms in Russia."

Under the "undesirables" law, Russians who maintain ties with "undesirables" or share their materials with Russian audiences face penalties ranging from fines to a maximum of six years in prison. It is one of many measures the Russian government has adopted since 2012 to tighten control over and marginalize independent groups, Human Rights Watch said.

Russia could use a handful of laws to shut down the work of foreign organizations. The "undesirables" law can not only force the end of a foreign organization's activity, but also cut Russian groups off from international partners to further isolate and marginalize them, Human Rights Watch said.

Amendments to the law on nongovernmental organizations authorize the Justice Ministry to unilaterally register as "foreign agents" Russian groups that accept foreign funding, to discredit and demonize them, Human Rights Watch said. More than 100 groups - including environmental, human rights, research, and other groups - have been listed. Some have been fined for supposedly failing to observe regulations for "foreign agents." Several have been threatened with criminal charges on other politically motivated

grounds. Other laws have imposed new restrictions on media and internet freedoms.

In July 2015, Russia's upper house of parliament sent the prosecutor's office a list of 12 organizations for investigation, with a view to determining whether they fit the "undesirable" criteria. The list included OSF and other U.S.-based donors, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the MacArthur Foundation, and the C.S. Mott Foundation. Several Russian politicians sent separate lists of foreign organizations to the prosecutor's office with the same request.

In July, the prosecutor's office designated the National Endowment for Democracy an "undesirable" organization, and at the end of July, C.S. Mott and the MacArthur Foundation announced they would discontinue funding in Russia. The Open Society Foundations fund Human Rights Watch work in many countries around the world, but not in Russia.

"The government should put an end to the witch hunt against 'undesirable' organizations," Williamson said. "Instead, it should restore an environment that would make it possible for independent groups to do their work."

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