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Russia's Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders Escalates

Court Case and Smear Campaign Won't Defeat Defenders

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Today, Russia's Supreme Court granted the Justice Ministry's demand to shut down one of the most prominent rights groups in the country – the Movement for Human Rights. The ruling, in keeping with government policy, delivers another severe blow to Russian human rights defenders, who have been increasingly under attack in recent weeks.

On October 31, Federal Security Service and counter-extremism police in Perm, a major city in the Ural Mountains, searched the office of another group, Memorial, which works to preserve the memory of the victims of Stalin's "Great Terror," and the home of its director, Robert Latypov, seizing computers, documents, and an old chain-saw.

The searches were part of a criminal investigation into "illegal logging," which Memorial's activists supposedly carried out last summer. Latypov told me that the "logging" consisted of removing dead branches and a rotten fence from the cemetery where some Lithuanians and Poles displaced under



File photo: Human rights activist Lev Ponomarev speaks to the media at the For Human Rights movement headquarters in Moscow, Russia. On November 1, 2019 Russia's Supreme Court granted the Justice Ministry's demand to shut down the organization.

© AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, June 22, 2013.

Stalin were buried. The organization was targeted the day after the Day of Remembrance of Political Repression Victims, an irony not lost on Latypov and other Memorial activists.

This pattern of targeting human rights defenders is not new, but it is escalating.

Earlier this month, a court in Moscow fined the headquarters of Memorial in Moscow 400,000 rubles (US\$ 6,250) for failing to add “foreign agent” markers to their YouTube and Facebook posts – breaching one of the government’s repressive laws which requires all organizations designated “foreign agents” by the Justice Ministry to identify themselves as such in all of their publications.

Memorial’s Human Rights Center was also issued a 300,000-ruble fine (US\$4,690) for a similar reason. In a more personal attack, Yuri Dmitriev, head of Memorial’s branch in Karelia in the northwest of the country, well known for exposing mass graves of people shot dead during Stalin’s era, is now facing bogus charges of sexually abusing a child.

This smear campaign is widespread and aimed at undermining the work of human rights defenders in the eyes of the public. Two weeks ago, one of Russia’s top broadcasters, NTV, aired a story about Memorial, the Movement for Human Rights, and others, accusing them of portraying “extremists” and “hooligans” as political prisoners, engaging in dirty financial activities, and duping naïve people.

And yet, despite being prosecuted, smeared, and stifled with fines, Russian defenders persevere.

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