

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Another prominent Russian NGO is facing closure following a court decision compelling it to register as a “foreign agent”

On 14 May 2014, the City Court in Novocheerkassk, in south-western Russia, ordered the NGO Alliance of Women of the Don, to register as “an organization performing the functions of a foreign agent”.

The Alliance of Women of the Don is one of the oldest and biggest human rights non-governmental organisations (NGO) in Rostov-on-Don Region. It is well known and highly regarded for its work on a range of social, economic and other issues, from violence against women to the rights of army conscripts and pensioners. For over 20 years, the NGO has been providing qualified legal advice, counselling and other free services to thousands of people, advocating reform of the police and speaking out on other topical human rights issues. The head of the Alliance, Valentina Cherevatenko, is a member of the regional Public Commission for the Oversight of Places of Detention.

The court upheld a request submitted by the Prosecutor’s Office and ruled that activities of the Alliance are “political” and, since it is receiving funding from foreign sources, it should register as “an organization performing the functions of a foreign agent” in accordance with the law that came into force in November 2012.

According to the NGO’s lawyer interviewed by Amnesty International, the court agreed with the Prosecutor’s Office that the following activities of the NGO are “political”: submitting an annual report to the Ministry of Justice (something which it is legally required to do), sending a report to its funders and publishing both these reports on the NGO’s website, holding round tables on police reform (irrespective of the fact that these had taken place before the “foreign agents law” came into force), and the publication of an article in the NGO’s newsletter which criticised the ongoing reform of the police. These activities, in the view of the Russian authorities, were “political” because they contained legislative initiatives concerning the police and criticism of the Ministry of the Interior, and through these activities the NGO has “sought to shape public opinion” with a view to “changing state policy”. The Prosecutor’s Office also alleged in court that during a prison visit, as a member of the Public Commission for the Oversight of Places of Detention, Valentina Cherevatenko had attempted to convince a prisoner to support the NGO’s views on police reform. While it is unclear how this could help advance the prosecutor’s case against the NGO, another member of the Commission testified in court that this was not true.

Prior to the court hearing, the Alliance of Women of the Don clearly stated its position that it is not a foreign agent and will not register as such. It intends to appeal the court’s decision.

This is already the third NGO in Russia which has been directly ordered through a court decision to register as “an organization performing the functions of a foreign agent” (the law prescribes that the respective NGOs do so voluntarily). The latest Russian NGO issued with such an order was the Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial (ADC Memorial) in St. Petersburg, which had worked in support of victims of racism and xenophobia in Russia. On 8 April 2014, ADC Memorial lost its appeal against a similar court decision and decided to close down rather than register as a “foreign agent”.

The right to freedom of association, along with other freedoms, has been increasingly under attack in Russia since the return of Vladimir Putin to presidency in May 2012. The “foreign agents law” was swiftly adopted in June and enacted in November 2012, following which hundreds of independent NGOs

throughout Russia have been subjected to unannounced “inspections” by the Prosecutor’s Office and other government agencies, as well as other forms of pressure and harassment. Dozens have been embroiled in court hearings, and several have been forced to close, including due to extortionate fines imposed on them and their leaders under the new legislation.

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