

The Washington Post
March 8, 2015

A cloud over Russia's civil society

by Alexey Semyonov and Alexey Bayer

Thirty-five years ago, on [Jan. 22, 1980](#), Andrei Sakharov was detained by KGB agents on a Moscow street and packed off to Nizhny Novgorod, then called Gorky. The decision to send the human rights defender and winner of the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize into internal exile came as relations with the West deteriorated after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan a month earlier. Today, history is being repeated as the Russian government mounts a legal attack on human rights and civic organizations — including an institution created to preserve Sakharov's legacy — at a time when Moscow's relations with the world are strained by its involvement in a war in neighboring Ukraine. And with the brazen murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov last week within sight of the Kremlin, the need for a vibrant civil society in Russia is all the more urgent.

In December, the Ministry of Justice, acting on an anonymous denunciation, carried out an unscheduled inspection of the Sakharov Center, one of the oldest and most respected nongovernmental organizations in Russia (and, appropriately, the venue of the memorial service for Nemtsov). Along with 16 other independent NGOs, the center was [required to register as a "foreign agent"](#) under a law passed in 2012. Some NGOs have decided to shut down rather than admit to or challenge this designation, which in Russian carries clear connotations of "spy" and "traitor." The Sakharov Center is contesting its designation as a foreign agent and, in the meantime, faces heavy fines that could endanger its survival.

[The 2012 law](#) designates as foreign agents those NGOs that receive any funding from abroad (regardless of the source) and engage in political activity (as arbitrarily defined by the Ministry of Justice). The law has been central to the government's intensifying crackdown on independent thought, and last year [Russia's highest court found](#) that the law was not intended to persecute or discredit any group — even though it does exactly that.

Founded in 1990, a year after Sakharov's death, the Sakharov Center is a civic and cultural institution that houses a permanent exhibition on the history of repression in the Soviet Union and puts on temporary exhibitions on human rights. Its space is also used for discussions, debates and performances in the spirit of Sakharov's principles of openness, tolerance and unrestricted debate. The center recently served as the venue for the play "Nadya and Olya, a Love Story," about the early-20th-century Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and his wife, Nadezhda. A discussion in early February addressed protection for freedom of speech.

Because of these and similar events, the Ministry of Justice said the center “[systematically carries out political activities](#).” In its inspection report, the ministry cited the topics of those discussions, as well as statements by participants — who were not affiliated with the center — that were critical of government agencies and policies. In other words, the ministry equated criticism of the government with political activity, in the same way that Sakharov’s activities — his civic advocacy of human rights, dignity and international disarmament — were considered “anti-Soviet” and brought about his persecution and exile.

The Sakharov Center does not accept the ministry’s broad definition of political activity, which should properly cover only actions and publications supporting specific political parties and candidates or efforts that otherwise seek to exercise influence over the state. Moreover, the center has not changed its mission or its policies since the ministry investigated it in past years without labeling it a foreign agent. Apart from the financial pressure — the center could face repeated fines of up to about \$7,500 for the same alleged transgression — being classified as a foreign agent raises issues greatly complicating the functioning of the center. Worse, a slew of new and [pending legislation](#) would allow the government to ban any NGO classified as a foreign agent as well as other “undesirable foreign organizations.”

As Rachel Denber, deputy Europe and Central Asia director for Human Rights Watch, [noted](#), “Instead of targeting independent groups, the government should be listening to what they have to say.” On paper, Russia claims to have broken with its Soviet past. On the surface, it continues to honor Sakharov’s memory and has repudiated the Soviet-era persecution of the physicist. A major Moscow thoroughfare is named after him. In Nizhny Novgorod, a monument to Sakharov was placed in front of the building where he and his wife spent six years of their exile. But such honors are meaningless while the principles that Sakharov stood for are under siege.

“At certain periods of time in the life of any nation, there will be people who turn on the light, if you will. They show a road for the nation to follow,” Russian President Vladimir Putin said [in a 2001 interview with NPR](#). “Andrei Sakharov was one of those people: a visionary, someone who was able not only to see the future, but to articulate his thoughts, and to do so without fear.” The road that Sakharov showed us is indispensable for any country to grow, develop and prosper in the modern world. The Russian government can begin to follow it by ending its persecution of the Sakharov Center and other NGOs acting in the spirit of the principles for which he stood.

Alexey Semynov is president of the Andrei Sakharov Foundation. Alexey Bayer is a member of the foundation’s Advisory Board.