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Russia applies sinister new tactic to tar civil society as 'foreign agents'

A Russian court has for the first time ordered a non-governmental organization to register as a "foreign agent" under a sinister law that is being used to crush independent civil society in the country, Amnesty International said.

On 27 November, following an application by the prosecutor, the court in the city of Saratov ordered that the Centre for Social Policy and Gender Studies should register as "an organization performing the functions of a foreign agent".

"The Russian authorities are using this sinister new tactic to impose the draconian '[foreign agents law](#)' on independent civil society organizations nationwide," said John Dalhuisen, Director for Europe and Central Asia programme at Amnesty International.

"The law harkens back to the repression of the Soviet era and its sole purpose is to smear and muzzle independent civil society voices in Russia, making their work impossible."

After enacting the law a year ago, the Russian authorities unleashed a mass campaign of "inspections" of independent NGOs which receive any funding from donors abroad and engage in vaguely defined "political activities". Since then, several NGOs have been issued with extortionate fines for failing to register as "foreign agents", and at least three have been forced to close down.

However, in a number of cases across the country, judges have ruled in favour of NGOs when they challenged requests to register as "foreign agents". The Saratov case marks the first time a Prosecutor's Office has successfully employed a new tactic which consists in securing a court order to force the NGO to register as a "foreign agent".

"Even under Russia's flawed justice system, Prosecutors' Offices have failed to impose the absurd 'foreign agents law' uniformly. Now they are trying a new tactic, and this new court decision sets a dangerous precedent," said Dalhuisen.