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Soldiers' Mothers NGO Appeals for Removal of 'Foreign Agent' Label

By Allison Quinn

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The St. Petersburg branch of the non-profit group Soldiers' Mothers has appealed to the Justice Ministry to remove the "foreign agent" label applied to the organization in August, Kommersant reported Monday.

The organization first wound up on the ministry's radar in March when its chairman, Ella Polyakova, published comments on the Ukraine conflict which the ministry viewed as "political activity."

In accordance with a controversial 2012 law, any NGO that receives foreign funding and conducts what the ministry considers to be political activities must register as a "foreign agent."

The ministry based its decision on Polyakova's comments and the fact that the group had repeatedly received grants from organizations based overseas, according to Kommersant.

In appealing the ministry's decision, the group pointed out that it stopped receiving any foreign funding in May, and has been relying entirely on funding from the Russian government since late June.

"With this appeal, we are not contesting the actions of the Justice Ministry. We are merely asking to be excluded from the register [of organizations labelled 'foreign agents'] in light of the fact that we do not fall under the category of a 'foreign agent.' This, of course, does not mean that we agree with [the ministry's] decision to include us on the list. That will still be challenged in court," Alexander Peredruk, a spokesman for the group, said in comments to Lenta.ru.

The ministry's decision to add Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg to the list of foreign agents in late August followed controversial statements made by Polyakova during a program aired by the independent television channel Dozhd.

Polyakova, also a member of the Kremlin's human rights council, said at that time that 100 injured Russian soldiers had been transported to a St. Petersburg hospital from an undisclosed location, hinting that they may have been fighting in eastern Ukraine.

She also cited another member of the Soldiers' Mothers group as saying Russian soldiers in Dagestan had been paid 250,000 rubles ($7,000) to fight in Ukraine.

The timing of the ministry's decision prompted speculation by some that the group was being punished for making such loaded statements, but the group had in fact been asked to register as a foreign agent in July, long before those comments were made, according to Kommersant.

It remains to be seen whether the Justice Ministry will consider the group's appeal. By law, there is no provision for such appeals, though there has been discussion between the ministry and NGOs on creating amendments to the "foreign agent" law to allow for such a move, Lenta.ru reported.

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