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Russia's 'Foreign Agent' Law Must Be Repealed

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The bad news just keeps coming. The Moscow School of Civic Awareness (MSCA) has been compelled to close its doors. The organization, formerly known as the Moscow School of Political Studies, had provided a venue for Russians from numerous regions to listen to intellectual leaders from around the world come and speak on issues related to politics, economics, media and art.

Because foreign donors had helped found the school, the authorities included it on their list of so-called "foreign agents."

Refusing to carry a label akin to the yellow Star of David that Nazi Germany forced Jews to wear, the school announced that it would cease operations.

Created more than 20 years ago by Yelena Nemirovskaya and Yury Senokosov, the MSCA was pure gold. I have honestly never seen anyone more selflessly and altruistically devoted to the idea of enlightenment than Yelena. She "placed her life on the altar" in the truest sense of those words.

It might seem simple enough to bring in any number of lecturers if you have money to offer. All across Russia, various organizations host forums and bring in celebrities such as U.S. political scientist Francis Fukuyama.

However, Yelena Nemirovskaya built something entirely unique during her 20-year labor of love.

The MSCA is practically the only venue in Russia that the world's intellectual elite know and respect so much that they are happy to speak there, sometimes on repeated occasions, for nominal fees or at no charge.

That is why the organizers always managed to find funding, win grants and convince wealthy donors that lectures on freedom and creativity are essential to society — without resorting to less honorable means for procuring support.

Have you ever heard of Anne Applebaum? Robert Skidelsky? Carl Bildt? Krzysztof Zanussi? I have purposely left out their titles and job descriptions. Find them on Wikipedia and then ask yourself where else someone could listen to all of them in person.

How else could a city official or journalist from one of Russia's outlying regions listen to, question and even debate leaders of thought and culture from around the world?

The law on "foreign agents" was adopted in order to prevent foreign powers from secretively using their money to influence Russian politics. But what connection is there between politics and civic education?

What is secretive about an organization that posted every single word spoken by its lecturers in the public domain and disclosed every penny and kopek of its financing?

It is not possible to overestimate the influence these lectures have had. Even ultraconservative State Duma Deputy Irina Yarovaya has attended talks at the MSCA, along with many other influential public figures.

This type of education is not propaganda. It has no ulterior motives, no "hidden agenda" and is always an engine of progress.

The MSCA was a force for pure good. The forces that compelled it to close are pure evil. Any law that causes this much damage should be repealed as soon as possible.

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