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Russian Media NGO Pays Biggest Fine So Far Under Foreign Agent Law

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RPI director Anna Sharogradskaya.

The director of a St. Petersburg nongovernmental organization said Monday she had paid the biggest fine so far imposed under Russia's controversial "foreign agent" law.

Anna Sharogradskaya, director of the Regional Press Institute (RPI), paid 400,000 rubles ($6,800) for not registering her NGO — which aims to assist journalists and the media — as "performing the functions of a foreign agent," she told The Moscow Times.

Monday was the deadline given to pay the fine under a Jan. 23 ruling by a St. Petersburg district court.

Along with other NGOs, the RPI had boycotted the "foreign agent" law that was introduced in 2012 and obliges NGOs receiving foreign funding and involved in political activities to register as "performing the functions of a foreign agent." The law has been broadly

criticized for failing to adequately define "political activity," stigmatizing NGOs and evoking Stalin-era spy mania.

Following mass inspections by prosecutors in 2013, the RPI was eventually put on the Justice Ministry's "foreign agents" list on Nov. 20, 2014, and shortly afterward a St. Petersburg magistrate's court imposed a fine on the NGO for not having registered itself voluntarily. Since its inclusion on the register, the RPI has added a disclaimer to its e-mail announcements to comply with the law. It reads: "Attention! According to the Justice Ministry, the RPI is a foreign agent."

The RPI's stated aim is to "facilitate the establishment and development of independent media in Russia that could become the basis for a stable democratic society."

Sharogradskaya, 73, said she had scraped together the money to pay the fine, collecting half of the amount in donations and using money from her own pocket for the remainder. Using funds from grants received by the NGO was not an option, as all grants are assigned to specific programs, she told The Moscow Times by phone on Sunday.

"It [the fine] is not being paid by the organization, because the organization doesn't have so much as a spare kopeck that is not for programs. We simply don't have the right to spend even the little that we have on this," Sharogradskaya said.

Political Accusations

As with other organizations (there were 49 "foreign agents" listed as of Monday), the Justice Ministry claimed on its website that the RPI had organized public events and "formed public opinion" to achieve the political goal of "influencing the decision-making of state authorities aimed at changing state policy."

The RPI activities that the authorities deemed to be political were a seminar on the development of local democracy and self-government held by the NGO in Vyborg in December 2013, and the presentation of a book by Sergei Yegorov and Pavel Tsyplyonkov, "Sausage/Democratic Revolution in Russia. 1989-1993," on the RPI's own premises in St. Petersburg in May 2014.

"I don't deny that throughout the more than 21 years [since the NGO was established in St. Petersburg, originally as the Russian-American Press and Information Center in 1993] we had foreign grants, and I don't deny that hardly any Russian sources will give money for freedom of the press — at least, we had no such opportunity," Sharogradskaya said.

"But the law's other component — involvement in political activities — has nothing to do with us at all. Because I have always taught journalists that even if they have any political sympathies and antipathies, they should keep them to themselves and try to present different viewpoints. I am always angered when somebody says that journalists should 'form public opinion,' and respond that it is a euphemism for 'propaganda.' Propaganda is for political media, but not for the free press. That's why our entire philosophy is built on the idea that there should be no forming of public opinion: Inform, educate, and if you want to, entertain — but there should be no brainwashing."

The foreign agent legislation was introduced as part of a wider clampdown on Russian civil society following the disputed State Duma and presidential elections of 2011 and 2012, in which a number of violations were exposed that sparked massive protests in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other Russian cities.

The law is aimed at "effectively, the extermination" of undesirable NGOs, Sharogradskaya said, citing a number of organizations that have closed after being targeted under the law. "This is the extermination of free thinking among people independent of Russian funding," she said.

Extremism Charges

Sharogradskaya also faces possible prosecution for "extremism" following an incident at St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport in which she was detained for five hours by customs officials on June 5, 2014 as she was heading to the United States.

"I thought it was revenge on the part of the Prosecutor's Office after we filed a lawsuit against it for what we saw as an illegal additional inspection, but it came out in court that it was the FSB [a successor agency of the Soviet KGB]," she said.

Sharogradskaya's laptop computer, iPad and 11 memory sticks were seized and never returned. According to the NGO director, the computers and memory sticks contained articles from open sources that she had prepared for her annual two-month summer stint of lectures at the University of Indiana.

In November, the Pulkovo Airport police department claimed in court that the contents could be grounds to prosecute Sharogradskaya for inciting hatred, punishable by up to four years in prison. No charges have yet been pressed.

"I was also summoned to the Center E [counter-extremism police unit] and they said they found extremism in the texts that I had stored. Why the FSB, why Center E, I don't know. They just need to justify themselves somehow for what they seized," Sharogradskaya said.

"Because I try not to dramatize events, I think they [simply] did a stupid thing and didn't have the courage to admit it. The fact that they pass the case from one to another and don't make any decision shows that they just got confused."

Sharogradskaya's lawyer Ivan Pavlov said that formal complaints to the European Court of Human Rights are being prepared regarding both cases in cooperation with the interregional association of human rights organizations Agora.

According to Pavlov, the prosecution of the RPI violates the European Convention on Human Rights article on "freedom of assembly and association," while in the Pulkovo incident Sharogradskaya was deprived of legal assistance and her right to respect for private life was abused.

"The combination of shots fired at Anna Arkadyevna [Sharogradskaya] and the Institute of Regional Press that she heads show that there's a campaign against an independent organization, and this campaign involves a great number of interested agencies, including

the FSB that showed its interests in the customs case, of which we have documented proof," Pavlov said Monday.

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