

Russian Media Rights Center Fined \$6,000 for Failing to Register as 'Foreign Agent'

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A Russian media rights organization has been fined 300,000 rubles (\$6,000) for failing to label itself a foreign agent after a court ruled that the group's actions qualified as “political activity,” the organization's lawyer said.

The Voronezh-based Center for Media Rights said in court that the Justice Ministry had committed a number of “violations” in its case against the group but the judge sided with the state authorities, lawyer Svetlana Kuzevanova was cited as saying Wednesday by Interfax.

The Justice Ministry had argued that public statements about Russian laws by the group's head Galina Arapova constituted “political activity” because they aimed to influence public opinion — thereby making the organization subject to the country's law on foreign agents, the report said.

The law requires any non-governmental organization that receives funding from abroad and engages in vaguely defined political activity to register as a “foreign agent” — a term that

dates back to the Soviet era, when it was synonymous with the word “spy.”

The center, which has been operating since 1996, says on its website that the group's “main goal is to assist in the development in Russia of freedom of speech and freedom of expression as a fundamental element of a democratic, lawful state.”

The Justice Ministry and other government agencies conducted earlier inspections into the center's work, but never deemed its activities to be political, Kuzevanova was quoted by Interfax as saying. The group will appeal the latest ruling, she said.

The verdict came on the heels of a similar ruling against a Siberian environmental conservation that was also fined 300,000 rubles for failing to register as a foreign agent after receiving funding from abroad, Interfax reported Wednesday.

Another media affairs group, St. Petersburg's Regional Press Institute, paid the country's highest-ever fine of 400,000 rubles (\$8,000) last month for failing to register as a foreign agent.

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