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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Leading Independent Pollster Blacklisted as 'Foreign Agent'

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Levada Center employees leave their office with the sign "Levada-center. Jury Levada analytic center." in Moscow, Russia **Mikhail Metzel / AP**

Russia's Justice Ministry has declared the independent pollster the Levada Center to be a "foreign agent," saying the decision to blacklist the center followed an unscheduled inspection of Levada's documents.

Speaking to the television network Dozhd, the center's director, Lev Gudkov, said it will be impossible for Levada to continue operating, listed as a foreign agent. In other words, Gudkov explained, the organization will likely be forced to close down, if it is unable to appeal the Justice Ministry's decision.

In July 2016, the Pro-Kremlin "Anti-Maidan" movement appealed to officials, demanding that the Justice Ministry investigate whether the Levada Center should be designated as a "foreign agent." The group accused Levada of receiving more than $120,000 from the U.S. government since 2012.

The Anti-Maidan movement also claimed that the University of Wisconsin–Madison “acted as an intermediary between the Pentagon and the Levada Center.” Gudkov has stated that the U.S. Defense Department played no role in Levada's work with the American university.

Russia’s 2012 law on foreign agents requires NGOs that receive funding from abroad and engage in loosely defined political activity to register as “foreign agents,” incurring additional police scrutiny and checks.

A number of NGOs have shut down, unwilling to work under such conditions. Others have given up foreign funding and suffered bankruptcy. There are currently more than 80 NGOs listed as foreign agents in Russia.⊠⊠Levada has already been threatened with being forced to register as a foreign agent. In 2013, following an investigation and facing pressure from authorities, the pollster says it suspended all foreign funding.

The Levada Center is one of Russia's three largest national polling agencies. Following the Justice Ministry's decision today, the center is now forbidden from participating in anything that might be construed as campaign activity. Russia will hold parliamentary elections in less than two weeks, on Sept. 18.

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