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Kremlin Hints That Blacklisted Independent Pollster Can File an Appeal

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The independent pollster the Levada Center, which Justice Ministry officials recently blacklisted as a "foreign agent," can appeal the government's decision, says the Kremlin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov.

"Concerning the decision, I don't consider it possible to comment," Peskov said at a press conference. "The Justice Ministry is guided by certain considerations, arguments, and facts. Levada has the opportunity to appeal the decision according to set procedures, and here there are all the required instruments needed for this organization to defend its position."

Peskov added that the Levada Center is one of Russia's most established organizations, "possessing vast experience and authority among sociological and polling agencies."

At the time of this writing, the Levada Center's website has been disabled by hackers. The center told the news agency Interfax that it is doing what it can to bring the site back online. Currently, Levada.ru displays the following error message: "Account disabled by server

administrator."

Earlier this week, on Sept. 5, state officials declared that the lion's share of Levada's funding comes from foreign marketing firms and U.S. universities. Arguing that the polling agency practices political activity, Justice Ministry officials highlighted a paper published in 2014 by Lev Gudkov, the center's director, that described Russia's system of government as "mafia-ruled and corrupt." Officials also cited Gudov's criticism of the annexation of Crimea and the center's citations of research conducted by the daughter of Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated in 2015.

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.

Gudkov had said it will be impossible for Levada to continue operating, while listed as a foreign agent.

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