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Russian Enviromental Group Fighting Wildfires Declared 'Foreign Agent'

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The Ecology Watchdog of the North Caucasus, an environmental NGO involved in battling wildfires in southern Russia, has been labelled a “foreign agent," Russia’s Justice Ministry announced Wednesday.

The decision was made after an “unplanned inspection of the documents” revealed that the NGO met the criteria to be named “foreign agent,” the ministry said in an online statement. Under a law signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2012, NGOs which receive foreign funding and are engaged in vaguely-defined “political activity” are required to identify themselves as “foreign agents."

The Ministry did not specify what kind of political activity the NGO was involved in, or from where it received its foreign funding.

The move follows an attack on volunteer firefighters with environmental activist group Greenpeace group in the area. The group had been invited to the region by the Ecology Watchdog of the North Caucasus, to deal with wildfires in the Krasnodar region and neighboring republic of Adygeya.

Greenpeace reported that their group had been attacked by unidentified men in masks on Sept. 9. The attackers severely injured several members and demanded that the activists "got the hell out of here" and "went back to your America." Several days after the attack, state-run TV channel Rossiya accused the group of starting the very fires they came to extinguish and acting in the interests of the U.S. government.

Hundreds of Russian NGOs have been locked in battle with the Justice Ministry since the "foreign agents" law came into force four years ago. Many are unwilling to accept the negative connotations of the Soviet-era label, as well as the time-consuming inspections to which "foreign agents" must submit. A number of NGOs in Russia have shut down as a direct result of the law.

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