

Suck It Up, Foreign Agent

A Moscow appellate court sends a Russian nonprofit group packing, after state-owned TV called its founder a spy.

By [Kevin Rothrock](#)

March 10, 2017



Nadezhda Kutepova **Nadezhda Kutepova / Facebook**

When suing the Russian news media for defamation, it helps to be a billion-dollar state-owned oil company, instead of a blacklisted nonprofit group. That's the lesson Nadezhda Kutepova learned this week, after an appellate court in Moscow upheld a rejection of her organization's lawsuit against a major news company.

In the late 1990s, Kutepova founded Planeta Nadezhd (Hope Planet) in Ozyorsk, a town built around the Mayak nuclear power plant. The Russian government classifies this settlement as a strategic site and it's accordingly closed to visitors.

In 1957, one of the storage facilities in Ozyorsk exploded and radioactive materials poisoned

the area around it, including the River Techa. Planeta Nadezhd spent years lobbying to get medical treatment and benefits for locals affected by the accident.

For its trouble, Planeta Nadezhd was rewarded in April 2015 by being blacklisted as a “foreign agent” by Russia’s Justice Ministry, on the grounds that the organization accepted foreign funding and carried out political activities. A month later, it was fined 300,000 rubles (\$5,000) for failing to register with the government’s list of foreign agents.

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Kutepova’s problems multiplied when a state-owned national television network then singled her out in a report, calling her an American spy.

"Planeta Nadezhd uses American funds to conduct industrial espionage," an anchor on Rossiya-1 told millions of TV viewers. Over the coming months, more reports aired about Kutepova and her nonprofit group, including footage of her home and an interview with a former agent in the Federal Security Service, who warned that “her actions are a [national security] threat.”

Fearing she would be charged with espionage and treason, and heeding the advice of her attorney, Kutepova and her four children fled to Paris, where they were granted political asylum.

In February 2016, lawyers from “Komanda 29” took Planeta Nadezhd’s case to a court in Moscow, demanding that VGTRK, the state-owned holding company for Rossiya-1, retract its espionage allegations. The judge ultimately ruled in favor of VGTRK, finding that the allegations were broadcast merely as correspondents’ personal opinions.

The Moscow appellate court upheld this verdict on Friday, March 10.

Remarkably, a Russian court came to the opposite conclusion in a recent defamation suit brought by Rosneft against the independent news outlet RBC, which is being forced to retract an article published in April 2016 reporting that the company’s CEO asked Vladimir Putin to block Rosneft’s minority shareholders from buying more shares.

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Despite RBC’s insistence that its sources can verify the story, a court has ordered the news agency to delete it from its website and issue a public apology.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/03/10/suck-it-up-foreign-agent-a57397>