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Russian Independent Pollster's Status as a 'Foreign Agent' Is Final

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AP Photo / Mikhail Metzel

The Moscow city court has upheld a lower court's ruling in support of the Justice Ministry's decision to add independent pollster the Levada Center to Russia's federal registry of "foreign agents," according to the news agency Interfax.

Last November, a district court in Moscow rejected a lawsuit by the Levada Center to overturn its new "foreign agent" status. In September 2016, the Justice Ministry blacklisted the polling agency, arguing that the Levada Center accepts foreign funding and engages in "political activity."

A law passed in 2012 subjects Russian organizations labeled "foreign agents" to additional, often crippling police scrutiny and checks. Many of the NGOs that have landed on the registry have closed their doors, unwilling to work under such conditions. Others have given up all foreign money, only to suffer bankruptcy.

In May 2013, the Levada Center announced that it would refuse any further foreign grants, hoping to avoid being blacklisted by the Justice Ministry.

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In July 2016, two months before the Levada Center was declared a foreign agent, pro-Kremlin activists complained to the Justice Ministry that the pollster accepted money from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which they argued was acting as "an intermediary for the Pentagon."

"We don't have the right to receive grants or direct financing, but we can fulfill commercial contracts to carry out investigative work," Lev Gudkov, the Levada Center's director, said at the time.

In October 2016, a court fined the Levada Center 300,000 rubles ($5,000) for failing to register itself voluntarily with the Russian government as a foreign agent.

In early December, at a meeting with his Council on Human Rights, President Putin acknowledged that adding the Levada Center to the foreign agents registry poses "a problem." The next day, a spokesperson for Russia's Justice Ministry indicated the ministry's readiness to exclude sociological survey work from its definition of "political activity," if only the president issues such an order.

Lawyers for the Levada Center said on Monday that the organization has filed an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights.

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