The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

This Russian Teacher and Feminist Activist Is a 'Foreign Media Agent'

"I look in the mirror and see a tired, aging legal entity."

By Pjotr Sauer

May 21, 2021



Darya Apakhonchich. **Facebook**

Like many Russians, Darya Apakhonchich is an enthusiastic Facebook user. Her wall is filled with posts about her young children, her work as a language teacher and topics she worries about.

But everything Apakhonchich posts includes a prominent disclaimer in Russian:

"THIS MESSAGE (MATERIAL) WAS CREATED AND (OR) DISTRIBUTED BY FOREIGN MASS MEDIA PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT, AND (OR) A RUSSIAN LEGAL ENTITY PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT"

Apakhonchich is one of five private citizens in Russia designated as a "foreign media agent"

by the country's Justice Ministry at the end of last year. Since then she has been legally obliged to mention her status on all her social media posts or face steep fines.

"I was extremely sad and shocked when I read in the media that I was on the list as a foreign media agent, Apakhonchich told The Moscow Times.

"I thought how could this be? I am a private person, not part of any media or organization."

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The foreign agent law was introduced in 2012 following mass anti-government protests and initially targeted NGOs the Kremlin believed had foreign funding. Russia has since gradually expanded it to include "undesirable" organizations and media outlets, and ordinary citizens.

In December 2020, Apakhonchich, together with four others, became the first Russian citizens to be labeled foreign media agents.

A former Red Cross-language consultant who has given Russian lessons to migrant and refugee women, Apakhonchich is also a feminist activist in St. Petersburg who has staged performances in support of her cause

She, and her lawyer Pavel Chikov — the director of the Agora human rights group — believe it was her activism that put her on the foreign agent list, despite the court statement that it was her work for the Red Cross and payments from foreign language schools.

Odd one out

Apakhonchich's name stands out from the other four more public media personas targeted by the law — veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov, journalist Lyudmila Savitskaya who works for the media outlet backed by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorvkosky and two journalists working for independent regional outlets.

Apakhonchich is open about having received honoraria Western institutions, which she said comes with being a language teacher.

"I teach the Russian language to foreigners, of course, I am paid occasionally by foreign funds for that," she said.

"There are tens of thousands like me. But I was singled out."

The court also said her "political activity" contributed to the foreign agent listing.

Critics of the law say the Justice Ministry's definition of "foreign agent" is vague, making it possible to brand almost anyone as such.

Chikov said that under political activities the law includes election monitoring and social media posts about Russian politics, and added that anyone could be deemed a foreign agent for obtaining "support from abroad," not just foreign funding.

The law also states that the foreign agent designation can be applied to anyone distributing

information from media outlets recognized as foreign agents.

Apakhonchich made an unsuccessful appeal in court that her limited social following does not qualify her as mass media, and said she never used any of the money she received to create a foreign mass media.

Chikov believes the real reason behind her inclusion on the list is her women's rights activism.

"We have seen that the authorities are currently on cracking down on feminist activists," Chikov said.

He pointed to the inclusion of Russia's most vocal women's aid group Nasiliu.net — Russian for "no to violence" — on the foreign agent list as a sign the authorities are cracking down on feminist organizations.

Tatyana Lokshina, the associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch agreed that Apakhonchich was "picked on" by the authorities to send a signal to other Russian activists.

"St. Petersburg has a vibrant civil society — lots of artists, critical thinkers, protest activists. It is also the birthplace of Russian feminism. Darya is evidently one of the many — she was chosen at random with a demonstrative aim to intimidate all others," Lokshina said.

Apakhonchich said she has lost her various teaching contracts with the Red Cross and her landlord has evicted her and her family from their flat. She will now also be obliged to submit quarterly financial reports to the Justice Ministry. The Red Cross did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Worst of all, she said, she has to mention that she is a foreign agent in any application for a new teaching job.

"It is humiliating, they are taking away my profession. My livelihood," Apakhonchich said.

"It is like being given the label Enemy of the People during Soviet times."

Wider Crackdown

Lokshina said Russia is increasingly turning to branding independent voices foreign agents "to stigmatize them and stifle critical descent."

According to a calculation from independent media outlet IStories, Russia currently has 82 organizations and five individuals listed as "foreign agents." Among them are some of Russia's leading human rights organizations including Memorial, as well as its last independent pollster the Levada Center agency.

Most recently, the Justice Ministry branded the popular independent media outlet Meduza a foreign agent, as well as the newly founded business outlet VTimes. Both have said their survival is under threat after many advertisers pulled out.

Trying to “get her life back to normal,” Apacherich last week unsuccessfully appealed her status as a foreign agent. Following the verdict, she turned to Facebook to voice her desperation.

“I look in the mirror and see a tired, aging legal entity. In my country, I am no longer a person but a foreign agent.”

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