Independent Russian News Site VTimes Shuts Down Following 'Foreign Agent' Labeling

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Russia's independent VTimes news and economics outlet has announced it will shut down on June 12, just weeks after authorities designated it as a "foreign agent."

VTimes was [launched](#) last October by a group of former senior editors and journalists who left the business daily Vedomosti after clashing with newly appointed chief editor Andrei Shmarov, whom they accused of pro-Kremlin censorship.

Related article: [Why We're Closing VTimes, One of Russia's Last Independent News Outlets](#)

The outlet on Thursday said its business model has been "destroyed" after the Russian Justice Ministry last month added Stichting 2 Oktober, the Dutch nonprofit that hosted VTimes, to its registry of "foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent."

In a statement, VTimes' editorial staff said that its core sources of funding, advertisers and partners, have pulled out en masse since the designation.

The designation has also hindered the website's news coverage by making its government, business and analyst sources afraid to give comments to its journalists, VTimes said.

VTimes said it looked at seven options for moving forward following its "foreign agent" labeling but that none of them proved viable as staff would face criminal charges and imprisonment in each case.

"When we launched VTimes last year, we announced that we were not creating a propaganda tool, but a high-quality and independent media outlet and a platform for the free exchange of constructive opinions. ... And today we are proud to say: We did it! But we have seen for ourselves that the authorities do not need professional, non-government-controlled media," its statement said.

VTimes said it will cease publishing and fundraising on June 12 — Russia's Independence Day.

Russia's "foreign agent" law, first [introduced](#) in 2012 following mass anti-government protests, initially targeted NGOs the Kremlin believed had foreign funding. Russia has since gradually expanded the law, which critics say is aimed at stifling independent voices, to include "[undesirable](#)" organizations and media outlets as well as [ordinary citizens](#).

Under the law, any individual or group receiving funding of any amount from abroad can be labeled a "foreign agent." Labeled individuals and groups are required to report their activities and finances in rigorous audits and face steep fines for violations. Other media outlets are also required to clearly label the designated entities as "foreign agents" and face fines if they don't.

Related article: [Russia Out to 'Kill' Popular News Site Meduza With 'Foreign Agent' Label, Editors Say](#)

VTimes' designation came weeks after Meduza, Russia's leading independent news website based in Latvia, was also [labeled](#) a "foreign agent." Meduza has vowed to challenge the label in court and launched a crowdfunding campaign in a bid to compensate for an exodus of advertisers.

The EU recently criticized Russia for its "foreign agent" legislation, saying it "contributes to a systematic infringement of basic freedoms, and restricts civil society, independent media and the rights of political opposition in Russia."

On Tuesday, former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev [defended](#) the labeling of Meduza and VTimes as foreign agents, saying their readership "deserves to know what they are reading."

The VTimes statement didn't state what its staff will do in the future, only saying that "closing the VTimes project does not mean that we are abandoning our principles and leaving the profession."

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