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Russia Says Gifts, Conferences Fair Game for 'Foreign Agent' Label Against Media

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Protesters staged solo pickets in central Moscow against the use of Russia's "foreign agents" law against journalists. **Vladislav Shatilo / RBC / TASS**

Russia's Justice Ministry has said that gifts from relatives and participation in international conferences are fair game for a media outlet to be labeled a "foreign agent," a member of the presidential human rights council said Monday.

Eva Merkacheva's account of the Justice Ministry briefing appeared after the ministry added the independent Dozhd broadcaster and investigative site Important Stories (iStories) to its registry of "foreign agents" Friday.

Critics say the designations — which join a growing list of independent outlets including Meduza, Open Media, The Insider and VTimes — are part of the Kremlin's crackdown aimed at silencing critical voices ahead of key elections next month. Open Media and VTimes shut down after receiving the label.

Related article: Russia Labels Broadcaster Dozhd, Investigative Site iStories 'Foreign Agents'

According to Merkacheva, the Justice Ministry's deputy director for non-commercial organizations Roman Tsiganov told the rights council that the government enjoys broad authority in determining grounds for labeling an outlet, NGO or individual a "foreign agent."

"If a journalist went on a press tour paid for by a foreign organization, can they be recognized as a 'foreign agent'?" he was asked.

"The answer is yes," Merkacheva said in a Facebook post.

"If a journalist went to an international conference where their accommodation was paid for by the organizers, can they be recognized as a 'foreign agent'?"

"Yes."

"If a journalist wins an international competition and their trip to receive the award is paid for [by the organizers], can they be recognized as a 'foreign agent'?"

"Yes."

"If a journalist has friends and relatives living abroad who have transferred a monetary gift to them for their birthday, can they be recognized as a 'foreign agent'?"

"Yes."

Merkacheva added that an official from the state media watchdog Roskomnadzor said that Dozhd was labeled a "foreign agent" because it was distributing materials published by other "foreign agents."

An official from state financial watchdog Rosfinmonitoring said that Dozhd had received funding from abroad, though they did not specify where from or how much, Merkacheva said.

"Every journalist is a potential foreign agent," Merkacheva wrote, adding that the council is drafting recommendations for the authorities to adopt a warning system that would allow news outlets to rectify any errors before being labeled a "foreign agent."

Dozhd editor-in-chief Tikhon Dzyadko said that he had learned about the Justice Ministry briefing as it was happening and that no one from the broadcaster had been invited to attend.

The Kremlin has denied being involved in the latest decision to brand Dozhd and iStories, as well as six iStories journalists, as "foreign agents."

"Foreign agents" are required by law to submit regular financial reports, as well as include boilerplate text stating their designation on everything they publish, including social media posts. But media outlets say the label alienates them from advertisers, sources and partners.

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