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Blacklisted Russian Investigative Outlet Relaunches With Look at Defense Chief's PR Machine

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Former Proekt editor-in-chief Roman Badanin. **VOA**

An independent Russian investigative outlet that was banned as "undesirable" and its journalists labeled "foreign agents" has relaunched as a new entity, with an investigation into the alleged PR machine of the country's defense chief.

Proekt's former chief editor Roman Badanin announced Monday that his new outlet is called "Agentstvo," a play on the journalists' "foreign agent" status and the Russian word for "agency."

Related article: Russia Bans Independent Investigative Outlet Proekt with 'Undesirable' Label

"It will also be engaged in investigations and we'll try to make them as irritating to the Russian authorities, but it's most important that you'll find them interesting and important,"

Badanin tweeted.

Agentstvo's first investigation targets Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who is leading President Vladimir Putin's list of candidates in this month's parliamentary elections. The unusual move to place popular sitting cabinet officials on the ballot is seen as an attempt to boost the ruling pro-Putin party's flagging image ahead of the vote.

According to Agentstvo, which cited unnamed former employees and journalists, Shoigu has built up a "cult of personality" through sophisticated PR campaigns and strict orders for positive media coverage of the minister.

Embed:

> Друзья, это Роман Баданин, основатель запрещенного российскими властями издания «Проект». Мы запускаем новое СМИ — «Агентство». Оно тоже будет заниматься расследованиями, и мы постараемся, чтобы они тоже раздражали российские власти, но самое главное — были интересны и важны вам
>
> — «Агентство» (@wwwagentsmedia) September 6, 2021

"Shoigu is very sensitive to his own image. The minister has an effective system to combat criticism built up over the years," the outlet said.

Agentstvo noted that images from Shoigu's annual trips to the Siberian taiga with Putin are also seen as a public relations boon.

"Their joint vacation on camera is beneficial for both rulers," it said. "Shots from their active recreation boost their positions in the eyes of Russians, according to a friend of the minister."

The Russian Prosecutor General's office added Agentstvo's predecessor Proekt to its "undesirable foreign NGOs" registry in July, banning its activities within the country. Badanin and three Proekt journalists were also added to Russia's registry of "foreign agents" by the Justice Ministry.

Russian law requires the newly declared "undesirable" organizations to disband, while "foreign agents" are subject to rigorous financial auditing requirements with steep fines for errors. They are also required to add boilerplate text stating their designation on everything they publish, including social media posts.

Journalists at media outlets previously labeled "foreign agents" have also reported seeing advertising revenue dry up and sources refusing to talk to them.

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