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Russia Labels More Independent Media Outlets, Activists 'Foreign Agents'

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MediaZona owner Pyotr Verzilov. **Alexander Shcherbak / TASS**

Russia added the independent news site Mediazona and the police monitoring website OVD-Info to its registry of "foreign agents" Wednesday, amid what critics describe as a widening crackdown on independent voices in the country.

The Justice Ministry also added Mediazona editor-in-chief Sergei Smirnov, as well as its co-founder Pyotr Verzilov, to a list of individuals designated "foreign agents" Wednesday.

Mediazona was founded in 2014 by members of the punk activist group Pussy Riot and focused its coverage on police and law enforcement brutality and Russia's criminal justice system.

Launched in 2011 to quickly track detentions at protests, OVD-Info has since expanded into a large-scale project covering human rights and political persecution in Russia.

In addition to submitting quarterly financial reports, entities and individuals listed as

“foreign agents” are obliged to include boilerplate text stating their designation on everything they publish, including social media posts.

Russia’s registry of “foreign agent” media lists over 20 news outlets, including popular independent outlets like Meduza and Dozhd. A number of labeled outlets have been forced to shut down after the designation led to an exodus of advertisers, while others have vowed to adapt and continue their work.

Mediazona’s Smirnov criticized the move as “deeply discriminatory” and called for the public to continue supporting the outlet in a post on his Telegram channel. “It's monstrous. Calling someone a foreign agent in Russia is simply beyond the pale.”

Russia’s Justice Ministry also Wednesday added several regional heads of the independent election monitoring group Golos to the registry. Golos itself was listed as a “foreign agent” last month — a designation which frustrated their efforts to observe and monitor Russia’s nationwide parliamentary elections.

Several Russian media outlets have published open letters asking President Vladimir Putin to end what they describe as a “state campaign” against independent journalism. The Kremlin said earlier in September that it would review a list of amendments to Russia’s “foreign agent” law proposed by independent media.

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