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A Priest, a Pianist and a Spy: Russia's Latest "Foreign Agent" Designations

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Priest Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko. **Social media**

Authorities in Russia on Friday designated a Grammy-winning pianist, a priest who helps Ukrainian refugees and a former Soviet spy as "foreign agents," the latest update to Moscow's burgeoning list of individuals it deems as enemies of the state.

Hundreds of cultural figures, journalists, businesspeople, as well as news outlets and organizations, have been branded "foreign agents" — which carries negative Soviet-era connotations — since Russia introduced the legislation in 2012.

The Russian Justice Ministry's latest addition to the "foreign agents" list includes world-renowned concert pianist Yevgeny Kissin, Apostolic Orthodox Church priest Grigory Mikhnov-Vaytenko and ex-KGB officer Yuri Shvets. Dmitry Tsibirev, who served as a coordinator for the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny in the Saratov region, was also named a "foreign agent" on Friday.

"Kissin opposed the special military operation in Ukraine, took part in fundraising events in

support of the Ukrainian armed forces, including as part of his touring activities, and also transferred funds to them," the ministry said.

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Mikhnov-Vaytenko, meanwhile, was accused of spreading "fake news" about the Russian authorities and giving interviews to "foreign agent" media.

Shvets, who provides commentary on Russia's war in Ukraine for his popular YouTube channel, was accused of urging countries that are "unfriendly" to Russia to step up "unlawful actions" against Moscow. Since the 1990s, the former spy has lived in the United States, where he holds citizenship.

Russia applies the term "foreign agent" to people it sees as traitors and enemies of the state, and requires all those labeled to mark their publications with a lengthy disclaimer. Individuals branded as "foreign agents" are also required to submit rigorous financial reports to the Justice Ministry.

Independent media has reported that the number of criminal cases against "foreign agents" in Russia more than doubled in 2023 compared with the previous year.

Russian authorities have moved to further tighten legislation targeting "foreign agents" in recent months.

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