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Russia Aims to Tighten Grip Over Abkhazia With 'Foreign Agent' Designations

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Members of the Abkhaz Journalists' Union. **sj-ra**

In its routine update of the "foreign agents" registry on Friday, Russia's Justice Ministry included two journalists from Abkhazia, the Georgian breakaway region recently rocked by protests against a controversial investment deal with Moscow.

Izida Chania, the chief editor of Abkhazia's oldest independent news outlet Nuzhnaya Gazeta, and Nizfa Arshba, the chief editor of the local news agency Aishara, were accused of "spreading false information about decisions and policies" made by Russian authorities.

Earlier this month, the founder of independent news outlet Chegemskaya Pravda, Inal Khashig, was also declared a "foreign agent" by Russia, becoming the first Abkhaz journalist on the list.

Since introducing the registry in 2012, the Kremlin has used the "foreign agent" label as a tool in its campaign against civil society, hitting hundreds of cultural figures, journalists and businesspeople, as well as news outlets and organizations, with the designation.

Individuals and organizations branded "foreign agents" must submit financial reports and include a lengthy disclaimer on all published content — with failure to comply punishable by criminal charges.

Regional analysts and local observers say that by placing Abkhaz journalists on the list, the Kremlin seeks to tighten its grip on Abkhazia, including by strengthening the position of its recently elected Russia-backed President Badra Gunba.

"Following the November crisis in Abkhazia, Moscow has taken a much tougher stance on Abkhaz politicians, local activists and journalists," said Olesya Vartanyan, an expert on security and conflicts in the South Caucasus.

In November, mass protests broke out in Abkhazia's capital Sokhumi against a controversial deal with Moscow that would offer various benefits to Russian investors in Abkhazia, including an eight-year tax and customs duty exemption.

The protests triggered the resignation of Moscow-backed President Aslan Bzhania. However, despite the opposition's best hopes, Kremlin-aligned Gunba won the presidential seat in the run-off.

"Some [civil society and opposition figures] were stripped of their Russian passports, effectively trapping them inside this region, which is not recognized by most of the world. Others were placed on Russia's list of foreign agents to alienate them from the local population," Vartanyan told The Moscow Times.

"These and other measures have been implemented to suppress regular local resistance against Russian initiatives, which often lead to protests and have resulted in the overthrow of the last three local leaders," she added.

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Russia has been waging its passportization policy in Abkhazia since at least 2002. Two decades later, around 60% of the region's residents held dual Russian-Abkhazian citizenship, according to statistics cited by regional news outlet JAM News.

With Abkhazia's independence recognized by only five UN member states — Nicaragua, Russia, Syria, Tuvalu and Venezuela — a Russian passport is more often a vital tool allowing global mobility for Abkhazians than an expression of loyalty to the Kremlin.

"Foreign agent" journalist Nizfa Arshba is a rare exception, as she only holds an Abkhaz passport.

"I'm not a citizen of the Russian Federation. Never was. And Abkhazia is not Russia," Arshba said in a video statement Friday.

Many independent Abkhaz observers believe that the list of potential foreign agents was likely provided to Moscow by the loyal authorities in Sokhumi who are attempting to eradicate any possible opposition.

Despite repeated calls from various civil society members and the newly declared "foreign agent" Inal Khashig himself, Abkhazia's government has yet to issue an official statement on the recent designations.

Prominent Abkhaz lawyer Said Gezerdava described this as an "outsourcing of repressions."

"It is clear that this is retaliation for investigative and critical journalism and publications about the [recent] 'elections'," Gezerdava said in an opinion piece published by local news outlet Okno.

"Why are Abkhaz journalists writing about the Abkhaz authorities and their failed foreign policy being recognized as 'foreign agents' in a neighboring country? It is hard to believe that this is really needed [to anyone] outside Abkhazia," he added.

"We are returning to the black pages of Abkhazian history, when, in the name of power, money and other things, some fellow citizens commit treason against others. Once we get used to these repressions...more severe ones will follow," warned the lawyer.

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