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Russia Fines Yaroslavl Language School Over Link to 'Undesirable' British Council

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A Russian court northeast of Moscow has fined a local language center for referencing the British Council, a U.K.-backed cultural organization banned earlier this year, independent media reported Wednesday.

The Leninsky District Court in the city of Yaroslavl told the Mediazona news website that it had fined the Linguist language center 60,000 rubles ($735) for "participating in the activities of an undesirable organization."

The Russian Prosecutor General's Office declared the British Council an "undesirable organization" in June, accusing it of promoting "LGBT propaganda" and advancing "long-term British interests in education, culture and youth policy."

The law enforcement agency claimed the British Council sought to "rid post-Soviet nations of Russian identity."

Linguist reportedly left an old article on its website that included a hyperlink to the British Council, which helps run the IELTS English-language exam.

“We deleted everything promptly, but the trial will take place nonetheless,” the school’s management told Mediazona last Wednesday.

Related article: Moscow’s British Council Ban to Make Living and Studying Abroad More Difficult for Russians

Moscow has labeled dozens of Western-backed organizations “undesirable,” a designation that outlaws their work in Russia and makes anybody who cooperates with them vulnerable to years-long jail sentences.

The British Council, a state-funded body which promotes British culture overseas, had worked in Moscow continuously since 1959.

The group was forced to close its regional branches in the mid-2000s after the poisoning of ex-FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London, and it fully withdrew from Russia in 2018 following the Sergei Skripal poisoning case in Salisbury.

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has for years cracked down on independent civil society, outlawing groups and prosecuting dissenters in a campaign that has been escalating since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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