

Russia's Last Independent Pollster Is Fined for Refusing to Register as a 'Foreign Agent'

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The Levada Center, Russia's only independent pollster, has been fined 300,000 rubles (\$4,700) for failing to register as a "foreign agent." In September, Russia's Justice Ministry blacklisted the center, following a surprise inspection of Levada's documents.

On Wednesday, a Moscow court sided with the Justice Ministry, finding that the Levada Center is breaking the law by refusing to register itself as a foreign agent.

The pollster is currently contesting its status in court, where it is challenging the government's claim that its sociological survey work qualifies as "political activity."

The center's director, Lev Gudkov, has stated publicly that it would be impossible for Levada to continue operating while listed as a foreign agent.

On Sept. 7, days after the Justice Ministry blacklisted Levada, the Kremlin's official

spokesperson Dmitry Peskov hinted that the center could overturn the decision if it appealed in the courts.

Russia's 2012 law on foreign agents requires NGOs which receive funding from abroad and engage in loosely defined political activity to register as "foreign agents," incurring additional police scrutiny and checks.

A number of NGOs have been shut down, unwilling to work under such conditions. Others have given up foreign funding and suffered bankruptcy. There are currently more than 80 NGOs listed as foreign agents in Russia. Even before this September, Levada had already faced threats of being forced to register as a foreign agent. In 2013, following an investigation and facing pressure from authorities, the pollster says it suspended all foreign funding.

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