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Europe/Ex-USSR - Russia

Hounding NGOs

## Another media support NGO to be listed as "foreign agent"?

26 February 2015

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**It is [now](#) the [Media Rights Defence Centre's](#) turn to be targeted by the justice ministry. After a week-long inspection, the ministry has concluded that this NGO gets funding from abroad and that its activities are "political." This means that it could now be classified as a "foreign agent" at any time.**

Based in the western city of Voronezh, the MRDC is one of Russia's leading NGOs specializing in legal assistance for news media in difficulty. Every year, it prepares around 100 court cases in defence of journalists and has worked with more than 1,100 Russian media outlets since its creation in 1996.

Its lawyers also write expert opinions for the Council of Human Rights, an offshoot of the president's office, and for parliament's Civic Chamber.

The justice ministry's regional office investigated the MRDC from 10 to 18 February and found that it satisfied the two conditions – foreign funding and "political" activities – for being declared a "foreign agent." If added to the ministry's [register of 41 other "foreign agents,"](#) it will also have to pay a fine of 500,000 roubles (about 7,000 euros) for failing to register voluntarily.

*"The Media Rights Defence Centre's sole aim is to ensure respect for the Russian public's right to freedom of expression, a right theoretically guaranteed by the constitution,"* said Johann Bihl, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk.

*"The fact that this leading NGO could now be added to the 'foreign agents' list just confirms the draconian nature of this register. We again urge the authorities to respect the activities of civil society and to repeal this absurd and paranoid law."*

The MRDC has never tried to hide the funding it gets from international bodies such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and private foundations, but it rejects the description of its activities as "political."

**Galina Arapova**, the head of the centre, said "this is a problem for Russian society when lawyers are being accused of political activities for criticizing legislation."

In support of their findings, the justice ministry's experts [cite](#) the MRDC's declared aims, which include "promoting freedom of expression as a fundamental value." But it is mainly [on the basis of Arapova's public statements](#) that the justice ministry has concluded that the MRDC's activities are "political."

She is [accused](#), for example, of criticizing Russia's media laws, describing certain bills as "harmful for society" and saying "state control of the media will prevent different viewpoints from being represented in the media." And the opinions she has given as a lawyer to various public bodies have also been termed "political activities."

The law under which NGOs getting foreign funding and conducting very vaguely and broadly defined "political activities" can be classified as "foreign agents" [was adopted](#) in July 2012, a few months after an [unprecedented wave of opposition protests](#).

Since June 2014, the justice ministry has had full powers to classify NGOs as "foreign agents" without referring to any court and regardless of the objections of the NGOs concerned.

Two media support NGOs, the Regional Press Institute and the privately-owned news agency

MEMO.RU, [were added](#) to the “foreign agents” register on 20 November. The [Siberia Press Development Institute](#) was added on 30 January.

Russia is ranked 152nd out of 180 countries in the [2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

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