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European Court Says Russia's 'Foreign Agent' Law Violates Human Rights

- By [RFE/RL's Russian Service](#)

In a landmark ruling, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) said Russia's "[foreign agent](#)" law violates the European Convention on Human Rights, saying it is "arbitrary" and used in an "overly broad and unpredictable way."

The case was brought to the court by 107 plaintiffs, including major media outlets and human rights organizations such as RFE/RL's [Russian Service](#) (Radio Svoboda) and the Memorial human rights group.

The court ruled on October 22 that the foreign agent law imposed "severe restrictions" on the plaintiffs' activities and found that their designation as "foreign agents" amounted to "intimidation."

"The Court found that the currently applicable legislation was stigmatizing, misleading and used in an overly broad and unpredictable way. This led the Court to conclude that the legislation's purpose was to punish and intimidate rather than to address any alleged need for transparency or legitimate concerns over national security," the [ruling](#) said.

The Russian law, introduced in 2012 and expanded in 2022, requires organizations receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," subjecting them to burdensome reporting, auditing, and labeling requirements.

The plaintiffs argued that the legislation formed part of a systematic campaign to stifle criticism of the government and curtail the work of rights defenders and independent media.

The ECHR noted that public opinion in Russia associated the term “foreign agent” with “traitors” and “spies,” stigmatizing those labeled as such. The court also found that publishing plaintiffs’ personal data and requiring detailed financial disclosures violated their right to privacy.

Among the penalties, RFE/RL’s Russian Service had been [fined](#) over 16 million euros (\$17.3 million) for failing to comply with the labelling requirements, the most out of any of the plaintiffs.

The Russian authorities escalated enforcement, eventually seizing the outlet’s bank accounts and blocking its websites following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The ECHR ordered Russia to pay RFE/RL’s Russian Service 60,000 euros (\$65,000) in compensation for costs and 950,000 euros (\$1.03 million) in damages.

RFE/RL President and CEO Stephen Capus [welcomed](#) the ruling.

"Journalism is not a crime, and it's gratifying to see the European Court of Human Rights acknowledge that as a matter of international law," he said in a statement. "As the European Court held in its judgment today, Moscow's 'foreign agent' laws were brazenly designed by the government to criminalize free speech and prevent independent journalists from doing their job."

Russians "deserve access to truthful information about their country," Capus added.

The court also criticized the dissolution of prominent organizations like Memorial and the Movement for Human Rights under the pretext of violating “foreign agent” regulations. The laws restricted not only their public activities but also their participation in the electoral process and access to state support.

Despite being excluded from the Council of Europe in 2022 following the start of Moscow's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Russia is still bound by the ECHR’s rulings for cases predating its removal.

However, Moscow has passed legislation preventing the enforcement of ECHR decisions issued since its expulsion, further complicating the impact of the ruling.

RFE/RL has vowed to continue its work despite Russian repression. Its Moscow bureau was forced to close in 2022, and many of its journalists have been designated as “foreign agents.”

In 2023, a Moscow court declared RFE/RL's Russian Service bankrupt, yet the organization continues to provide news to millions of Russian citizens from outside the country, maintaining its editorial independence under U.S. congressional funding.

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