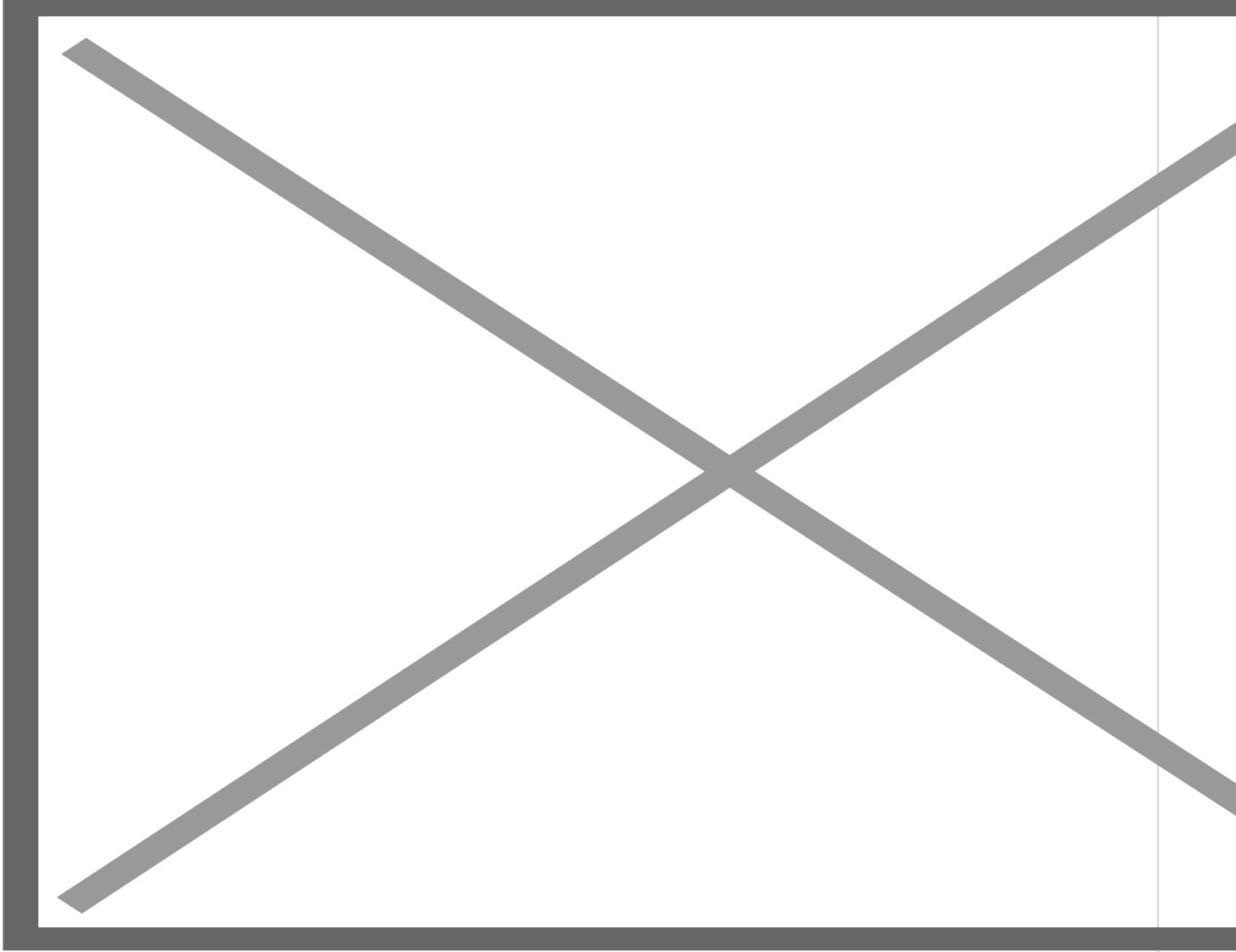


U.S.-funded broadcaster asks European court to block Russian fines

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Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty broadcasts news and other programs in 27 languages and 23 countries [Evgenia Novozhenina/Reuters]

Moscow, April 17 (RHC)-- The Moscow bureau of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) has called on Europe's top human rights court to order Russian authorities against enforcing fines that could cost the broadcaster millions of dollars.

The multimedia news outlet, which is funded by Washington -- a propaganda voice for the U.S. government -- has been heavily fined this year for what Russia says is a repeated failure to label itself as a media outlet "performing the functions of a foreign agent."

RFE/RL says Russian authorities have the power to place it into insolvency or block access to its media sites if the fines are unpaid -- or do both. Andrey Shary, its general director, faces the prospect of a prison sentence of up to two years and personal bankruptcy, the network fears. "We are hopeful that the European Court of Human Rights will view these actions by the government of Russia for what they are: an attempt to suppress free speech and the human rights of the Russian people," RFE/RL President Jamie Fly said in a statement.

Fly added that Moscow's actions set a "dangerous precedent at a time when independent media are under assault around the globe."

The standoff has added to friction in Washington's ties with Moscow that are already at post-Cold War lows, under pressure from several issues including Ukraine, Syria, sanctions and the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexey Navalny.

However, any favourable ruling by the ECHR would likely be largely symbolic as Russia passed a law last year giving its national legislation precedence over international treaties and rulings in cases when they conflict with its constitution.

Since October, Russia's communications watchdog Roskomnadzor has filed 390 violation cases against RFE/RL. The watchdog has the power to label foreign-funded NGOs, media or individuals it deems are engaged in political activity as "foreign agents."

Roskomnadzor has ordered RFE/RL to place a precautionary statement on its material which reads: "This report (material) was created and (or) disseminated by a foreign mass medium performing the functions of a foreign agent and (or) a Russian legal entity performing the functions of a foreign agent."

The designation also requires publications to report their funding and spending. The broadcaster says the watchdog's fines for failing to carry the statement could total the equivalent of \$2.4m and cause "irreversible harm."

RFE/RL, which is funded by a grant from US Congress through the United States Agency for Global Media, argues it has full editorial independence protected by US law and that the labelling requirement amounts to defacing its own product.

"While RFE/RL has complied with all of its legal obligations under the foreign agents law, it has declined to implement this new labelling requirement, which is clearly intended to damage its reputation and viability as an independent media organisation in Russia," the broadcaster said in a statement.

The outlet, which has a network of freelancers across Russia, covers Crimea, which Moscow annexed from Ukraine in 2014, in great detail, and provides extensive coverage -- in Russian -- of opposition protests and the fate of Navalny. It says it has almost doubled its Russian audience over the last five years.

The outlet, which was founded in the 1950s and was initially funded via the CIA, was for years at odds with Soviet authorities during the Cold War. After the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian President Vladimir Putin's predecessor in the Kremlin, Boris Yeltsin, invited RFE/RL to open an office in Russia.

Roskomnadzor said in a statement on Friday that compliance with the "foreign agent" law was mandatory and that the label was designed to make clear to a Russian audience that such organisations "pursue the interests of other states".

But the law, which applies to non-governmental political organisations and media receiving foreign funding, has been widely criticised as aiming to discredit critical reporting.

Russia has recently stepped up actions that appear to be aimed at stifling dissent.

Criminal charges were filed this week against four editors of an online student magazine. The publication had posted a video connected to January's nationwide protests calling for Navalny's release. A court last week fined Twitter 8.9 million rubles (about \$117,000) for failing to remove posts in which users called for minors to rally in the pro-Navalny demonstrations.

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/254355-us-funded-broadcaster-asks-european-court-to-block-russian-fines>



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