

Russia's Justice Ministry designates "Kremlin insider" Sergei Markov as "foreign agent"

On Aug. 22, the Russian Ministry of Justice added a surprising name to its list of "foreign agents": that of pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergei Markov. After learning of his new status, Markov took to Telegram, [writing](#) that: "The attacks on me are being carried out by enemies of Russia and enemies of Vladimir Putin's policies. They will either show themselves as traitors in the future or will be fired as corrupt officials."

Notably, Markov's contacts with representatives of the Western world are not in dispute. For [years](#), he has indeed been [cited](#) by major Western media outlets as "a political analyst close to the Kremlin."

Incidentally, a current member of *The Insider's* editorial staff — a U.S. citizen who was living in Russia in the run-up to the full-scale invasion — had a notable encounter with Markov in the late fall of 2021. Their meeting is described below:

In Moscow, on the evening of November 30, 2021, Sergei Markov showed up at a "liberal" dinner-and-discussion club I was a part of and started insisting that the looming Russian invasion of Ukraine would follow a "Crimean scenario." I was the only American in the group, and at the time, I put the chances of a serious Russian military incursion into Ukraine at around 10% — a conclusion that made me an extreme outlier among Muscovites of all political persuasions, almost none of whom took the Western warnings remotely seriously.

However, to the surprise of everyone present, Markov agreed with me — or, rather, he agreed that everyone else was dramatically underestimating the likelihood of war. In an insane discussion that he and I carried on for at least an extra half hour after everyone else had gotten bored and excused themselves, Markov remained adamant that the Western-backed neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv was committing genocide against the population of the Donbas, that the Kremlin's patience regarding efforts to find a diplomatic solution was quickly running out, and that when the Russian army arrived to restore order, 70% of Ukrainian military personnel would defect to the Russian side within hours, because "that's what happened in Crimea."

I knew for a fact that everything Markov was telling me was wrong to an almost unbelievable degree. Before moving to Moscow, I had lived for three years in a Russian-speaking area of Ukraine, and drawing on that experience, I attempted to explain to my interlocutor that he had no idea what he was talking about. It didn't work. In the end, he did not convince me that he was right, but he did convince me he was sincerely delusional.

Looking back on that episode, I'm fairly certain he fooled me. Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, Markov had been one of the more recognizable faces on the Kremlin-controlled domestic talk show circuit. However, by late 2021, he had long since disappeared from the domestic airwaves — and notably, the lies he was telling me in private bore no resemblance to the lies that Kremlin propagandists were telling their fellow countrymen at the time.

On the day Markov showed up to share his ideas about how ordinary Ukrainians were awaiting liberation from Moscow, domestic Russian propaganda was already systematically bombarding its audience with the lie that the Western world was actively arming Ukraine as

part of an effort to “provoke” Russia into a long, bloody, impoverishing war that would be fought “[to the last Ukrainian](#).” By January 2022, Markov’s old colleagues in the domestic Russian information space were [hyping](#) every new American delivery of Javelin anti-tank weapons to Kyiv. Meanwhile, Markov was [telling](#) English language audiences about how:

“Putin wants to stop political repression in Ukraine. Now we have repressive Kyiv russophobic regime. The Russian language, which is native language for 80% of the population of Ukraine, is tried to be prohibited by Kyiv repressive regime, and Putin want to stop this project to make [an] anti-Russia from Ukraine... Russia can support [the] uprisal of people in Ukraine, first of all in the pro-Russian regions such as Odessa, Kharkiv, and so on. If these people in Odessa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Nikolaev, will be able to take part in the honest referendum, they will vote exactly as in Crimea. [The] absolute majority of them want to be in Russia. They dream to be in Russia. They pray Vladimir Putin to make some strong decision to help them be liberated from Kyiv russophobic repressive regime.”

I have no idea what was actually inside of Markov’s head, but the things he was saying were completely divergent from the mainstream view inside of Russia itself. And yet, like an idiot, I not only concluded that Markov was out of his mind — I took his adamant delusions as [a sign](#) that the figures even higher up in the Kremlin hierarchy were probably just as isolated from reality as he was. Again, in hindsight, I believe that Markov fooled me, and I find it very difficult to imagine that I was the only American on the ground in Moscow who fell victim to a similar special messaging operation.

In recent months, Markov has actively lobbied for Azerbaijan’s interests. After the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Azerbaijan, he attended a media forum in the country’s capital, Baku, where he praised President Ilham Aliyev’s “genius” as a politician. Prominent state TV host and propagandist Vladimir Solovyov subsequently [called](#) for Markov to be designated as a “foreign agent” over what he described as his work for the Azerbaijani authorities.

The Russian Justice Ministry later [explained](#) its decision, saying Markov was added to the registry because he “took part in the creation and distribution, to an unlimited audience, of messages and materials of foreign agents, as well as in the dissemination of messages and materials from organizations included in the list of foreign and international organizations whose activities are deemed undesirable in the Russian Federation. In addition, he took part as a respondent on information platforms provided by foreign media and foreign agents, and spread false information about decisions taken by Russian public authorities and their policies.”

Markov himself has suggested that he was targeted over his comments to Western media, including *The Washington Post*, as well as for appearances with journalist Oleg Kashin, who had earlier been labeled a foreign agent.

In 2023, Markov accused opponents of the “foreign agents” law of hypocrisy, [saying](#):

“Those who call for no one to be labeled a foreign agent are precisely those who support the cancellation of Russian culture in the West, who support the persecution of public figures for even the slightest sign of support for Russia, and who support the violent derussification of Ukraine with neo-Nazi clubs. They are lying. They are not for freedom at all.”

Russia’s “foreign agents” regime started with a 2012 law targeting NGOs that engaged in broadly defined “political activity” while receiving any foreign funding. It has been repeatedly expanded since then, most notably by a consolidated law that [took effect](#) on Dec 1, 2022, allowing designations for virtually any person or entity deemed under “foreign influence” — and mandating those listed to disclose their sources of funding and mark all their publications with a special tag. Non-compliance can lead to large fines and [potential prison time](#).

As [noted](#) by Human Rights Watch, the expanded law constituted “an unrestrained attack on Russian civil society aimed at gagging any public criticism of state policies.” Many organizations shut down to avoid the stigmatizing designation or because they could not pay heavy fines for failing to meet the law’s burdensome and arbitrary labeling and reporting rules.

Over time, the registry has come to include major NGOs like the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Memorial, the Levada Center pollster, and all of Russia’s independent media outlets — *The Insider*, *Meduza*, *The Moscow Times*, and *TV Rain* among them. Numerous journalists, activists, and bloggers have also received the designation. *The Insider*’s editor-in-chief Roman Dobrokhotoev (#99 on the list), as well as investigative reporters [Sergei Ezhov](#) (#829 on the list) and [Andrey Zayakin](#) (#54 on the list) share the distinction of having been singled out individually.