

US Justice Department Forces RT America to Register as “Foreign Agent”

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RT, the Russia-based oppositional TV and Internet broadcaster, announced Thursday that the US Department of Justice has forced it to register as a “foreign agent” under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Washington has given the outlet until Monday to register as a foreign agent or its director could be arrested and its assets frozen.

The move is a product of the ongoing anti-Russia witch hunt being led by the Democratic Party, together with the US intelligence agencies, aimed at delegitimizing and outlawing domestic political opposition.

The Justice Department’s actions will have a chilling effect on the numerous independent journalists who have either worked for or appeared on RT, as well as on press freedom in the United States as a whole.

“In demanding RT America register as a foreign agent, the government has produced no evidence that RT qualifies as a foreign lobbying outfit, nor has it bothered to explain how this network is different from Al Jazeera, the BBC, or other state broadcasters,” Max Blumenthal, senior editor for AlterNet’s Grayzone Project, and a regular guest on RT America, told the World Socialist Web Site.

“The only conclusion to draw is that the US government is targeting RT on political grounds, on the basis of its role as a platform for critical perspectives on American foreign policy, and as a test case for a wider campaign of media suppression,” he added.

On January 6, the US Director of National Intelligence issued a report on “Russian intervention” in US politics, which denounced RT as a platform for oppositional sentiment in the United States.

The report alleged that the “channel portrayed the US electoral process as undemocratic and featured calls by US protesters for the public to rise up and ‘take this government back.’”

The report continued, “In an effort to highlight the alleged ‘lack of democracy’ in the United States, RT broadcast, hosted, and advertised third-party candidate debates and ran reporting supportive of the political agenda of these candidates. The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’”

The Director of National Intelligence report further denounced favorable coverage by RT of the Occupy Wall Street movement, declaring, “RT framed the movement as a fight against ‘the ruling class’ and described the current US political system as corrupt and dominated by corporations.”

The World War II-era Foreign Agents Registration Act required companies or individuals considered to be working on behalf of a foreign government in the US to disclose their funding and relationship with foreign governments or actors with the DOJ. According to RT, over 400 entities are registered under the act, but not a single media outlet is included in the list.

The DOJ originally sent a letter to RT America in September suggesting that the company was obligated to register under FARA. Registration under the law would require the outlet to disclose confidential information, including the personal information of its staff. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated the action would “have serious legal consequences” and “compromise the safety of [RT] employees.”

RT America has announced that it will comply with the DOJ’s demand, but will challenge the decision in court. RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan claimed the decision placed freedom of speech in the US under question.

“We believe this requirement is not just contrary to the law, and we intend to prove it in court. This requirement is discriminatory, it contradicts both the principles of democracy and freedom of speech,” she said. Simonyan added, “It deprives us of fair competition with other international channels, which are not registered as foreign agents.”

In his statement to the WSWS, Mr. Blumenthal condemned the silence of international human rights organization on the crackdown against RT. “So far, liberal civil liberties and human rights organizations have said nothing about the government’s assault on RT America. In their silence, groups from the ACLU to Amnesty International to the Committee to Protect Journalists, have made themselves accomplices in a McCarthyite crusade that is whittling away at press freedom.”

In last week’s congressional hearings on “extremist content,” lawmakers demanded that social media companies take decisive action in censoring “harmful content.” Members of Congress chastised representatives from Google, Facebook, and Twitter into testifying their social media platforms had been used by a foreign power to influence the 2016 elections.

Earlier this month, Google removed Russia Today from its list of “preferred” channels on YouTube. At one of the hearings, Senator Dianne Feinstein pressed Google’s legal counsel on why it took so long for YouTube to revoke the status of Russia Today as a “preferred” broadcaster. She demanded,

“Why did Google give preferred status to Russia Today, a Russian propaganda arm, on YouTube? ... It took you until September of 2017 to do it.”

California Democratic representative Jackie Speier asserted that RT “seeks to influence politics and fuel discontent in the United States.” She asked:

“Why have you not shut down RT on YouTube? ... It’s a propaganda machine... the intelligence community says it’s an arm of one of our adversaries.”

In addition to its crackdown on RT, Google has made sweeping changes to its search engine and news service that have dramatically slashed traffic to left-wing, antiwar, and progressive web sites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has had its search traffic from Google fall by 74 percent since April.

The Justice Department’s action will dramatically intensify this campaign for online censorship, targeted first and foremost against left-wing political opposition.

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