

Elections Watchdog Claims Harassment

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The country's sole independent elections watchdog has accused state-run media — including the notorious NTV channel — of mounting a massive smear campaign against it days ahead of the State Duma vote.

The campaign is trying to paint Golos, which is partially financed by European and American agencies, as a subversive agent of foreign governments aiming to influence the vote on Sunday, the watchdog's representatives said.

But political commentators said the pressure campaign may suggest that authorities are planning a massive vote-rigging effort and are trying to discredit the only group in place to expose it.

Golos deputy head Grigory Melkonyants told The Moscow Times by phone Tuesday that NTV reporters approached the group's activists three times between Friday and Monday with "provocative questions" about whether it is funded by the CIA.

A [video](#) uploaded by Golos on YouTube shows two unidentified young men storming into Golos' Moscow office Monday.

One man is seen brandishing a microphone marked NTV while shouting questions like "What is your organization doing?" and "Are you getting money from the U.S.?" He also accuses Golos of collaborating with the opposition.

No one answers the questions and Melkonyants, who filmed the incident on his cell phone, is heard repeatedly saying "You are Surkov's propaganda" throughout the 6 1/2-minute video.

The reference to the Kremlin's propaganda mastermind Vladislav Surkov was intended to render the footage unusable for the one-sided, hit pieces NTV is infamous for, Melkonyants said in a separate [interview](#) to Afisha.

Melkonyants told The Moscow Times that he and Golos head Lilia Shibanova also met Friday with other NTV reporters, but those interviews ended without incident.

In recent years, NTV has attacked ousted Mayor Yury Luzhkov and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko after they fell out with the Kremlin.

Police also [searched](#) Golos' office in the Altai republic's capital Barnaul last week, confiscating anti-election leaflets that the group [said](#) were brought in by the visitors, Baikal24.ru [reported](#).

"We regard [these incidents] as information pressure organized by Kremlin's spin doctors who are not interested in the independent observation of elections," Melkonyants said.

Repeated calls to NTV's press office went unanswered. A Kremlin spokesman refused to comment.

Melkonyants predicted that NTV would air a report about Golos "in the last days before or on the eve" of Sunday's elections in order to "make people doubt the facts [about election violations] that will be provided by Golos."

On Friday, the government-owned Rossiiskaya Gazeta [published](#) a scathing report on Golos, calling it a U.S.-run "commercial enterprise." The Infox.ru and Vzglyad news [web sites](#) also attacked the watchdog in separate reports last week.

Melkonyants said Tuesday that Golos has never made a secret about its funders, which include the EU, the British Embassy in Moscow and the American USAID, but insisted that does not make the watchdog biased.

Domestic authorities have repeatedly refused to support Golos, he added.

The watchdog is a thorn in the side of the Kremlin and the ruling United Russia party, who critics say are running a dirty election campaign relying heavily on administrative resources and abuse of authority.

United Russia's ratings are flagging, and many analysts speculate that it may have to resort to vote rigging to maintain its majority in the next Duma.

Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin [said](#) in an editorial Monday that the crackdown on election observers is proof that "electoral violations are already planned."

More than 3,000 Golos activists in 40 regions will be monitoring the Duma elections and the vote count on Sunday and Monday, the group [reported](#) on its web site.

Golos is also running an interactive user-generated [map](#) of electoral violations nationwide. The joint project with Gazeta.ru, available at Kartanarusheniy.ru, listed 3,780 reports as of late Tuesday.

The group has always faced harassment by authorities, but this was the first time "such strong pressure" had been exercised, Melkonyants said. He suggested it meant that Golos "has become a really powerful organization."

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