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Golos Overreaction Exposes Kremlin's Fears

By The Moscow Times

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Golos, the country's only independent elections watchdog, has come under an unprecedented attack from a Kremlin that fears losing its grip on power and is, once again, overreacting.

Golos, which openly accepts funding from USAID and the European Union, has not done anything remarkable this election cycle. As during previous elections, it has compiled reports of violations of election law — which topped 7,000 by Sunday —and dispatched scores of grassroots observers to polling stations.

But what is remarkable this time is the authorities' heavy-handed response.

The head of Golos was detained for 12 hours at Sheremetyevo Airport when she arrived Friday and only released after she turned over her laptop.

Across town, a court slapped a 30,000 ruble ($100) fine on Golos for allegedly breaking an

election law that forbids the publication of election opinion research five days before a vote.

Then on Friday night, state-controlled NTV television aired a blistering report that depicted Golos as a U.S.-funded group whose chief mission is to discredit and destabilize Russia.

The attacks culminated Sunday with a massive hacker assault that took down Golos' web site, as well as the sites of several other media that had reported on electoral violations.

So the question is why Golos and why now?

An answer can be found in a survey published by ComScore in mid-November that found Russia has become Europe's biggest market by number of Internet users, 51 million, overtaking both Germany and France.

The milestone number of Russians online coincides with another precedent: a drop in public confidence for United Russia and Putin. The result has been an outpouring of online complaints from "citizen monitors" who have witnessed electoral intimidation and abuse of power by government officials and United Russia-friendly private businesses — and recorded many instances on their cell phones.

Golos has harnessed the power of discontented voters like never before, notably with an online map showing the thousands of electoral complaints that went offline when the hacker attacks crashed its web site.

While Golos might be perceived as a new threat, the authorities' attack tactics are old hat. The laptop was seized at the airport over suspicions that it contained illegal software — a ploy that has been used against opposition-minded newspapers. The court case over a technicality smeared Golos' name but did little more than remind voters that the court system remains in need of a reform to make it truly independent. And the NTV report merely confirmed that the Kremlin is masterminding the attack on Golos. This is, after all, the channel that the Kremlin used to attack Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko and former Mayor Yury Luzhkov with similar reports last year.

As for the hacker attacks, this has been a favorite modus operandi for the authorities against its critics for several years. Recall similar attacks that targeted Estonian government computers in 2007 and the multiple attacks on critical web sites since then.

The Kremlin has a history of overreacting to perceived threats. After the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Kremlin grew fearful of street protests and cracked down harshly on youth groups like the National Bolshevik Party, sentencing members to unreasonably long prison terms for minor alleged infractions.

Cracking down on Golos is not the answer. The Kremlin should remember what ignited the street protests in Georgia and Ukraine in the first place: election fraud.

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