

Vote Watchdog Caught Between Kremlin and West

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Golos deputy executive director Grigory Melkonyants says the election watchdog's finances are crystal clear. **Ivan Sekretarev**

When reporters from the Kremlin-friendly NTV television channel barged into his office last month asking questions about Western funding, Grigory Melkonyants knew there was trouble ahead.

He and his boss at independent election monitor Golos had already sat for three interviews with NTV and made no secret about financing their group receives from organizations such as the European Union and USAID.

“But that wasn’t enough because they needed some kind of scandal,” said Melkonyants, Golos’ 30-year-old deputy executive director.

Two days before State Duma elections on Dec. 4, NTV broadcast clips from the interviews in a documentary accusing Golos of using Western money against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his United Russia party.

Hours after the documentary was shown, Golos' executive director, Lilia Shibanova, was held by customs officers at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport for 12 hours when she flew back to the country and her laptop computer was seized.

"They [the authorities] don't like this little organization that speaks the truth and criticizes," Melkonyants said. "This has nothing to do with journalism. It's an ordered, top-down campaign with the aim of discrediting the organization."

A few days after the elections, which cut support for United Russia to only a slim majority, Putin distanced himself from any blame for the worst election setback since he rose to power in 1999.

Putin accused the United States of stirring up protests against his 12-year rule following the poll and said foreign countries were spending hundreds of millions of dollars to influence the outcome of elections in Russia.

Putin's outburst has increased friction between the United States and Russia, despite their "reset" in relations, and Golos has been caught in the middle of it all.

As one of the few independent vote monitors in Russia, Golos, which means "voice" in Russian, has been instrumental in reporting allegations of irregularities, in some cases with video clips in support.

Golos' operations span 48 regions, more than half the country's total. Its money trail leads from Washington and Brussels to its headquarters in central Moscow. It is easy to follow.

In 2010, Golos received a two-year \$2.8 million grant from USAID, which gives money to foreign nongovernmental organizations working in areas from the health to political competition.

The money was to pay for the monitoring of two federal elections and three polls. The presidential vote, which Putin is expected to win, is on March 4.

Other funding, including 100,000 euros (\$133,000) from the European Commission and a smaller sum from a British organization, makes up its totally foreign-funded 55 million ruble (\$1.74 million) budget for 2011. Melkonyants says all of it is legal and the group remains independent. Russian money, he said, simply was not available to them.

Every spring, Melkonyants said, Golos applies for a presidential grant, and loses to other organizations such as Tsentr Aspekta, a group whose work is unknown among most of Russia's civil society.

"We've tried for many years to get funding from the president that is given to nongovernmental organizations. Every year we've applied, and we've never received anything," he said.

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said the United States had spent more than \$9 million on financial support and technical training for civil society groups before the Russian election and would keep supporting those working on free, fair and transparent elections.

The amount of money USAID allocated to programs in Russia was nearly \$55 million, according to a document on the organization's web site, including about \$3 million allocated to "political competition and consensus building."

Golos said it had never felt that the foreign money meant it had to bow to any Western political leanings.

"I am Russian, and this is a Russian organization. I never felt my partners wanted a particular result. I think they're much more interested in objective results," Melkonyants said.

Golos says it is now even thinking about giving up foreign funding altogether. The controversy has raised its profile in Russia, and it has started receiving donations ranging from \$20 to \$100.

Putin faces a big challenge to his authority. Tens of thousands of people protested in Moscow on Saturday and smaller rallies were held in dozens of other cities across the country calling to press demands for the election to be re-run.

The protests' organizers laughed off suggestions they received money from the United States or Europe. Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said Putin's accusations were "paranoid."

"The fact of the matter is that receiving financial support from abroad for political activities is illegal, a crime. If anyone received money from abroad they should be in jail," said Nemtsov, who served as a deputy prime minister under President Boris Yeltsin.

"People went out to demonstrate, not because [U.S. Secretary of State] Hillary Clinton called them out but because they are angry that they have had their votes stolen. These are proud people," he said.

Political parties are forbidden from using money from abroad to campaign; and their balance sheets, though less than transparent, are published on the Central Elections Committee [web site](#).

The Communist Party, commanding by far the biggest nationwide organization, received more money from individual citizens than any party. At more than 6 million rubles, individual contributions were greater even than United Russia's.

The Liberal Democratic Party, built around the flamboyant Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, relies on ill-defined "own funds" as much as donations from organizations. It received no contributions from citizens in 2008, its balance sheet shows.

The liberal Yabloko party had 139 million rubles in its electoral fund in 2008. The lion's share, more than 130 million rubles, came from institutional donors. The party declined to say who they were, but insisted they were all domestic.

Spokeswoman Sofia Rusova said that various social activities focusing on gender issues and ecological problems in Russian regions do receive foreign funding. She declined to say exactly how much and from where the funds came.

United Russia's electoral war chest was 420 million rubles, the equivalent of a little more than

\$13 million. Its critics point out that United Russia, as the ruling party, has an advantage anyway by holding the levers of power and Putin's tight grip on traditional media.

Opposition groups are wary of discussing finances but Alexander Averin, a spokesman for The Other Russia, says they receive no foreign money.

The lawyer for blogger Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader serving 15 days for his role in a protest the day after the elections, said the idea that Navalny received foreign financial support was ridiculous.

"We don't take any money flows from outside of the country. He [Navalny] is a lawyer by profession, and he has his own clients, and that is enough for living a modest life," Vadim Kobzev said.

Russia has often played up accusations of interference by foreign governments in its internal affairs.

A law passed in 2006, during Putin's second presidential term, expanded the government's control over nongovernmental organizations.

Parts of the law were amended in 2009 by President Dmitry Medvedev, but foreign funding of Russian NGOs remains a contentious issue.

According to the law, NGOs can receive money from abroad, but it is heavily taxed, in many cases by more than 24 percent, if the cash does not come from international organizations that figure into a list of pre-approved donors.

Access to the list is limited, but lawyers say it contains 12 organizations, such as UN bodies.

Despite legal and tax hurdles, accusations of foreign meddling hold power for some Russians, especially those who remember Cold War enmity between the Soviet Union and the West.

"There are suspicions. Putin wouldn't say anything without grounds, so he must know something we don't know," said business owner, Lyudmila Mashenko.

But Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin adviser who now heads the Foundation for Effective Politics, said Putin tried to deflect responsibility with the old tactic of blaming the United States.

"It's stupid. They were looking for some kind of enemy during the election campaign, but they didn't choose the right one," he said. "No one remembers the Cold War. This doesn't work any longer."

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