The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Kremlin Wants to Mute Our Golos

By Grigory Melkonyants

July 25, 2012



There are 120 days left until the amendments to a law come into force for nongovernmental organizations that receive foreign grants. Those who refuse to register as foreign agents could face stiff fines and up to three years in jail.

These amendments are unconstitutional since Article 13 of the Constitution stipulates that "public associations are equal under the law." The amendments place a much higher burden on NGOs that receive foreign grants.

But refusing foreign donations in this situation would be strange. There is nothing criminal or disparaging about the fact that NGO receives grants from legitimate, transparent foreign organizations. Thanks to these grants, Golos is able to defend the constitutional rights of Russians by monitoring electoral fraud.

The "foreign agent" law is part of a government effort to intimidate NGOs that act independently from the Kremlin and try to hold it accountable for violating the law. The main targets of the NGO law are organizations that irritate the government the most: organizations

that fight election fraud, corruption and human rights abuses.

Under the new law, a foreign agent is defined as an NGO that receives foreign financing and engages in political activities. Golos has no plans to include itself on this list because it is not involved in any political activity. It deals with human rights and research activities but certainly does not run for political office or support political candidates.

The arbitrary interpretation and application of the term "political activity" by the Justice Ministry is guaranteed to be a minefield for NGOs that the Kremlin doesn't like. The concept of political activity is defined in such a vague way that any criticism or study capable of influencing public opinion can be considered political activity.

The NGO law is really a form of government blackmail. According to the law, NGOs must declare to the Justice Ministry that they are "foreign agents engaging in political activity." But by doing so, NGOs like Golos would be forced to admit to something that it doesn't do. If an NGO doesn't include itself in the registry, it could be fined 1 million rubles ($30,000) and its directors could face up to three years in jail.

Today, Golos has branches in more than half of Russia's 83 regions. It has a large number of volunteers and supporters, and we can't let them down by scaling down our activities. For Golos, foreign grants are certainly not an end in itself but merely a means to help protect Russians' constitutional rights.

Grigory Melkonyants is deputy executive director of Golos.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/07/25/the-kremlin-wants-to-mute-our-golos-a16534