

# Golos Determined to Carry On Despite Legal Challenges

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Independent elections watchdog Golos says it is determined to continue its activities despite threats by Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov to strip the organization of its legal status if it fails to register as a "foreign agent," a term that is closely associated with spying in Russia.

"We might lose our legal status [as a nongovernmental organization], but we will not lose the intellectual and social capital that Golos has earned over the last 13 years," said Grigory Melkonyants, the NGO's deputy executive director.

A law that came into force in November 2012 requires all NGOs in Russia to register as foreign agents if they are involved in loosely defined "political activity" that is supported by foreign funding.

Golos was one of the main critics of the law, joining ten other organizations that lodged a complaint against it with the European Court of Human Rights in February.

Golos has been accused by the Justice Ministry of conducting political activity by developing and propagating a new election code and of receiving \$65,470 in award money from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, which supports people persecuted for their opinions.

As a result, the organization was fined \$10,000, while its executive director, Lilia Shibanova, fears that the next step will involve criminal charges against her personally.

The organization has denied wrongdoing and said it will not register as a foreign agent since, it says, the group did not accept the award money from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and has not engaged in political activity.

"We are much more mobile and strong than the Justice Ministry and I have no doubt we will be able to persevere with our work despite all obstacles," Melkonyants said by telephone.

"The only thing they're doing is increasing public awareness about us, which has already been reflected in the inflow of funding from ordinary Russians," he added.

A Justice Ministry representative could not provide immediate comment on the situation.

Golos was created in 2000 by a group of Russian NGOs that included the Moscow Helsinki Group and the Union of Environmental NGOs. Over its more than a decade of work, the organization has observed hundreds of elections across Russia and trained tens of thousands of election observers.

As Golos has become increasingly vocal in its criticism of alleged fraud in regional and federal elections, the Russian government has targeted it, with pro-Kremlin politicians and media outlets calling it a tool of the U.S. government. The pressure escalated after the 2011 State Duma elections that sparked large-scale protests against alleged electoral fraud.

Instances of alleged fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections and the 2012 presidential election were widely discussed on the Internet, with many videos of ballot-stuffing going viral. The first major slogan of the anti-Kremlin protest movement that emerged after the 2011 Duma vote was "Honest elections!"

The public outrage that followed the vote led to the establishment of several other election watchdogs that have worked on a volunteer basis.

Inna Kurtyukova, the coordinator of Citizen Observer, one of the larger such new groups, said the authorities have not limited its activities despite its lack of legal status.

"The only thing is that Golos was paying some of its observers, while we only spend money paid by individual sponsors on printing leaflets," Kurtyukova said.

But one lawyer was less optimistic about Golos' prospects, noting that a lack of legal status will make it very difficult for it to maintain the same structure and even keep an office.

"For a large-scale organization to lose its legal status is equal to a catastrophe," said Daria Miloslavskaya, a Public Chamber member and director of the Moscow office of the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law.

She said that without status as an NGO, it also could not have a bank account or sign contracts as a legal entity.

"They can sustain their morale, but it will be very difficult for them from the legal point of view," Miloslavskaya said.

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