The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Golos Reborn in Time for Election Day

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August 20, 2013



Grigory Melkonyants

Sitting in a tiny room that serves as a temporary office for elections watchdog Golos, Grigory Melkonyants, a senior member of the now defunct organization, is full of enthusiasm.

Despite the roller-coaster ride the organization has been through in recent months caused by sanctions placed on it by the "foreign agents" law — including a six-month forced shutdown and a hefty fine — Melkonyants is confident that the turmoil will push the group to a whole new level.

In fact, it already has, as Golos has announced its own reincarnation just in time for the country's first unified election day, with gubernatorial and mayoral elections set to take place simultaneously throughout the nation.

A detailed plan for the upcoming Sept. 8 elections has already been prepared by the "new Golos" and training of observers has begun, with the creation of an information center in the works.

"We've always been ready for the worst-case scenario," Melkonyants said, explaining that the group knew its revelations of election fraud could lead to it being targeted by authorities.

Golos, which has been under pressure from authorities since its inception in the 2000s and came under increased scrutiny after uncovering multiple violations in the 2011 Duma elections, was the first Russian NGO to be hit with sanctions under the controversial foreign agent law.

The law, which came into effect last November, requires organizations that receive foreign funding and participate in political activity to register as "foreign agents."

First, there were multiple checks into Golos' activity, interrupting its preparation for the upcoming unified elections day on Sept. 8. and forcing the entire staff to spend hours doing tedious bureaucratic work, digging up documents requested by inspectors.

Then, a court ruled that the group would have to pay a 300,000-ruble ($9,500) fine for refusing to register as a "foreign agent." And finally, the Justice Ministry ordered Golos to suspend all activities until December.

But rather than leading to the group's downfall after 13 years of devoted work, the shutdown inspired a complete reorganization, with the watchdog being reborn as a "movement" instead of an NGO.

The new format is similar to that of President Vladimir Putin's All Russia People's Front, Melkonyants said, explaining that the new format would allow the group to continue its work without having to waiting for court decisions and fearing that new charges would derail their activities.

"We studied the All-Russia People's Front charter thoroughly and adapted it to our needs by building a very similar structure for our movement but without a leader," Melkonyants said.

The new Golos will be open for dialogue with authorities, he said, even though those very same authorities have been suspected of falsifying election results in the past, Melkonyants said.

"The new Golos will fight election fraud even more actively than before," he said, adding that the goal was to "reset relations" with authorities by proving to them that without Golos, people would have no trust in Russian elections.

Although Golos lawyers will continue to adjudicate the rights of the former Golos association, the movement, as a completely new structure, will not be responsible for any past activity of Golos.

Melkonyants believes the new format will spare Golos from any "foreign funding" suspicions in the future, since no bank accounts can be created for a movement's financing in accordance with the law.

"Considering how biased the Justice Ministry is against Golos, we couldn't delay our work any longer," he said, adding that the organization was currently busy creating the Golos Fund, a legally registered body to provide funding for the movement since the group will no longer be allowed to have its own bank account.

The group expects its activity to be funded by private donations, donations from Russian companies and grants from public bodies.

The fund will be managed by a board of trustees consisting of well-known public figures and civil activists, but, as Melkonyants emphasized, "No politicians — we're not a political organization."

Earlier this month, activists from an NGO in Kostroma filed their first complaint with the Constitutional Court, asking the court to explain the meaning of the term "political activity" used in the foreign agents law and saying the law violates at least five articles of the Constitution.

Hundreds of NGOs across the country were hit with unscheduled inspections under the law.

And Golos' reorganization will be helpful to all of them, Melkonyants said, as the actions of authorities will demonstrate whether they "launched the campaign against NGOs to fight foreign funding or whether their real goal was to stop human rights activity in the country."

As for the impact of the new format on Golos itself, Melkonyants said the legal format would never define the group's goals and activity.

"We always thought of Golos not as a bank account, but as a community of people throughout the country who are not afraid to monitor elections," he said.

And just as the decision to change the group's legal status did not mean there were plans to abandon the name Golos, he said, the goal of resetting relations with authorities did not mean the group would become blindly complacent.

The new Golos sees itself as a mediator between the public and authorities, by providing training for all participants of the elections process — including observers, members of the election committees and even police at voting stations — and making all of them work together.

Apart from traditional observing at the upcoming Sept. 8 elections, the group also has plans for mobile groups of observers in case a violation is spotted, as well as web cameras.

All violations will be marked on an online map of violations, Melkonyants said.

The long-term perspective for the new Golos is to concentrate on municipal and regional elections, however, since most frauds fly under the radar there due to a lack of observers.

The group's new format should help with that by uniting observers from all over the country, something not as easily accomplished by an NGO, Melkonyants said.

He did not exclude the possibility of resistance by authorities during future elections, but said

serious pressure on Golos observers was unlikely, since authorities did not want a new elections scandal after the one that put the December 2011 parliamentary elections under a cloud of suspicion.

Nonetheless, he said, attacks on Golos would continue.

"It's just typical — after all, the authorities spend money on it," he said.

"We're ready for new complaints, but I don't know what form they could take on now. That depends only on how imaginative authorities can be," he said.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/20/golos-reborn-in-time-for-election-day-a26928