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Russian Election Watchdog Golos No Longer Labeled a 'Foreign Agent'

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In fighting its registration as a “foreign agent,” Golos says it has returned funding it had received from Norway's Helsinki Committee, RIA Novosti reported Tuesday.

Independent election watchdog Golos is not a "foreign agent," and should thus be struck from the government's registry, the organization announced in a statement Tuesday.

The Moscow City Court ruled on Monday that there had been no grounds to register Golos as a "foreign agent," and ordered the Justice Ministry to return 400,000 rubles ($10,800) in fines that the group and its director Liliya Shibanova had paid for their refusal to register, according to the statement.

The group is among a range of Russia's NGOs that the Justice Ministry has registered as "foreign agents" in accordance with a 2012 law that attaches the label to advocacy groups that receive funding from abroad and are engaged in loosely defined "political activity."

"The Justice Ministry now must remove Golos from its registry of foreign agents, [and] the government must return the 400,000 in fines that have been paid," the organization's

deputy directory Grigory Melkonyants said in a post on his Facebook page Monday night, adding that the group may also be able to fight other restrictions that have been imposed on its activities.

But it seems that the victory has come at the price of giving up funding from overseas human rights groups.

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Monday's ruling said that the court sided with a petition filed by Russia's human rights ombudsman Ella Pamfilova, who had previously argued that the law was too vague with regard to whether NGOs that give up foreign funding would still be forced to "wear the 'foreign agent' stain for the rest of their lives," Interfax reported.

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