The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian NGO Golos Still Labeled 'Foreign Agent' Despite Court Ruling, Lawyer Says

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November 27, 2014



Russian NGO Golos representatives pledged to appeal against the Justice Ministry.

Russia's leading independent vote monitor Golos remains on a restrictive list of "foreign agents" despite a Constitutional Court ruling to the contrary, a lawyer for the group has said.

The Justice Ministry has refused to drop Golos from a government list of "foreign agents" — a tag applied to NGOs involved in "political activity" that receive funding from abroad — in what lawyer Ramil Akhmetgaliyev said was a direct violation of the Constitutional Court ruling this April, Vedomosti reported.

NGOs labeled as "foreign agents" — a term widely used in Soviet times to mean "spy" — have to deal with crippling red tape in Russia, while criteria for inclusion on the list are so vague that it was applied to a bird conservancy last year.

The Justice Ministry sued in 2013 to have the tag applied to Golos because the NGO was

awarded a prize of 7,700 euros ($9,600) by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, a not-for-profit organization based in Oslo.

Golos, which was the main whistleblower during the questioned presidential vote in 2012, was also fined 300,000 rubles ($6,200) by the Russian government for failing to register as a "foreign agent." Golos argued that it had declined to accept the prize and therefore did not meet the label's criteria.

The Constitutional Court ruled in April that the rejection of the prize meant that Golos could not be considered a "foreign agent," but the Justice Ministry said it lacked proof that Golos had no intention of receiving the award or that it had actually turned down the money, Vedomosti reported.

Golos representatives cited by Vedomosti pledged to appeal against the Justice Ministry.

They said the ministry's determination is evidence of a clear policy to ensure the organization remains blacklisted.

In a separate clash between the authorities and NGOs, the Justice Ministry is seeking to fine the St. Petersburg branch of Soldiers' Mothers, which campaigns for the rights of soldiers and their families, over missing paperwork, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

The St. Petersburg group is embroiled in its own battle to have itself taken off the list of "foreign agents," with the Justice Ministry rejecting a request earlier this month to remove the label, saying it had no procedure in place to do so.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/11/27/russian-ngo-golos-still-labeled-foreign-agent-despite-court-ruling-lawyer-says-a41778