

'Foreign Agent' NGOs Won't Be Allowed to Monitor Russian Elections

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The Justice Ministry in Moscow.

Russia's Justice Ministry has worked out a procedure that would allow non-governmental organizations to remove themselves from the federal register of "foreign agents" if they appeal the move and pass a snap inspection, RIA Novosti reported Monday.

The move comes days after President Vladimir Putin conceded that there were shortcomings in a controversial 2012 law requiring NGOs that engage in vaguely defined "political activity" and accept funding from abroad to register as a "foreign agent" with the Justice Ministry.

The procedure proposed by the ministry in response to the president's criticism would allow organizations to remove themselves from the list if they pass an unscheduled audit, RIA Novosti reported, citing a spokesman of the ministry.

The ministry would have three months to take an organization off the list following its

submission of an application to do so, the report said.

News of the proposed procedure emerged as amendments were made to electoral legislation that prohibit groups registered as "foreign agents" from taking part in election-monitoring, RBC reported.

In addition to banning election-monitoring for groups dubbed "foreign agents," the new amendments also forbid these groups from promoting or hindering the candidacy of contenders in political races or from advancing referendum proposals, RBC reported.

The Central Elections Commission first voiced the need for such amendments ahead of elections in September, and they were introduced in late November with little to no media coverage, the report said.

The amendments, authored by Vladimir Pligin, chairman of the State Duma's committee for constitutional legislation, have been slammed as discriminatory by the deputy director of election watchdog Golos, Grigory Melkonyants, who was cited by RBC as saying that activists may turn to the Constitutional Court for clarification or to have the amendments overturned.

Melkonyants said the move represents the first wave of discrimination against NGOs included in the federal foreign agent registry — a list that one branch of Golos is included on.

Golos was one of the first groups to come under fire after the adoption of the foreign agent law.

After uncovering several violations during the 2011 Duma elections, the organization was hit with a 300,000 ruble fine (\$5,500) for failing to register as a foreign agent and ordered by the Justice Ministry to cease all activities for six months.

The group later reorganized as a movement rather than an organization, a technical change that allowed it to continue with its activities. Currently, the federal register contains 17 organizations deemed foreign agents.

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