

Regional Golos Head's Home, Office Raided

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The home and office of a regional head of election watchdog Golos were raided after she was accused of large-scale tax evasion in connection with a years-old donation from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Russian media reported.

Lyudmila Kuzmina, the head of the Golos branch in Samara, is suspected of having failed to properly declare USAID funding between 2010 and 2012, resulting in her alleged failure to pay some 2 million rubles (\$30,000) in taxes to the Russian authorities, Kommersant newspaper reported Thursday.

Golos and USAID have both had numerous run-ins with the Russian law, especially since Russia adopted legislation in 2012 requiring nongovernmental organizations to register with the Justice Ministry as "foreign agents" if they receive foreign funding and engage in loosely defined "political" activity.

The same year that law was adopted, Russia ordered USAID — which had been operating in the country since 1992 — to cease its Russian operations, accusing it of using grants to influence Russian politics and institutions.

However, the period at issue precedes both USAID's ouster, and the entry into force of the foreign agents law, Kuzmina said last month in comments carried by Mediazona, a news site focused on human rights issues.

In 2013, the Russian government launched a nationwide campaign of NGO inspections amid efforts to identify the "foreign agents" among them. Golos, which has documented electoral violations in Russia since 2000, was fined 300,000 rubles (\$4,500) for failing to voluntarily register as a "foreign agent" with the Justice Ministry.

According to Human Rights Watch, at least 55 organizations received warnings not to violate the "foreign agents" law and at least 20 others were ordered to register with the Justice Ministry during the mass inspections.

Golos was unilaterally added to the Justice Ministry's list of "foreign agents" in June 2014, after the law was amended to allow the ministry to give any NGO the "foreign agent" label without its consent.

Although a Moscow court ruled in September that Golos was in fact not a "foreign agent," the Justice Ministry has refused to scratch the organization from its list.

There are currently 36 organizations on the Justice Ministry's list of "foreign agents."

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