

Election Watchdog Reveals United Russia Candidates Receive Foreign Funding

By [Daria Litvinova](#)

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A number of United Russia candidates running in gubernatorial elections in Russian regions this year have received foreign funding for their campaigns, which is against election laws, research by the independent election watchdog Golos revealed.

Golos spotted the same violation during gubernatorial elections last year.

“Just last year some regions were headed by 'foreign agents.' Judging by the current trend, after the elections on Sept. 13, the number of re-elected governors whose campaigns were financed by foreign donors will grow,” said the report published on the watchdog's website Thursday.

The largest donations from abroad were received by candidates from the ruling United Russia party and by the party itself, according to Golos. Overall, the electoral funding of all United Russia candidates is two-and-a-half times larger than the combined funding of all the other participants in the 2015 gubernatorial race put together.

The usual scheme for concealing foreign sources of donations involves two Russian intermediaries, the report said. The Russian company that officially donates money to the candidate must be owned or controlled by another Russian company, which, in turn, is owned or managed by a foreign entity.

In many cases, the funding comes from offshore companies registered in Cyprus or the Virgin Islands that are stockholders of Russian enterprises.

This scheme, according to Golos, was used by Lipetsk region governor Oleg Korolev, who was elected last year. His campaign received 7 million rubles (\$200,000 at the time) this way. Astrakhan region governor Alexander Zhilkin received 1.5 million rubles (\$42,857 at the time) through the same scheme.

This year at least two United Russia candidates — Viktor Nazarov in the Omsk region and Vasily Golubev in the Rostov region, both incumbent governors — received foreign funding through intermediary Russian companies, the report said.

Spokespeople for Nazarov's campaign claimed the money was returned to the donor as soon as it became clear that it had come from abroad, Kommersant newspaper reported Thursday.

Contact the author at d.litvinova@imedia.ru

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