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Justice Ministry Refuses to Remove Elections Monitor Golos from 'Foreign Agents' List

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Russia's Justice Ministry has refused to exclude independent elections watchdog Golos from the list of “foreign agents,” the Vedomosti newspaper reported Wednesday.

Golos said on Twitter back in July that the ministry had begun the process of removing it from the list. Ruling that its inclusion was an “error,” the ministry also refunded fines the NGO had paid for not registering as a “foreign agent,” the Twitter statement said.

But during an inspection in July, ministry officials discovered that Roman Udot, a member of the organization's council, had received a payment last year from Lithuania's International Election Research Center, which was considered foreign funding, Vedomosti reported.

At the same time, the work of reporters at Grazhdansky Golos, a newspaper founded by Golos,

was considered political activity, the report said. Under a law adopted in 2012, NGOs that receive foreign funding and are involved in vaguely defined political activities must register as "foreign agents."

"The Justice Ministry is making things up ... they consider Udot's author's fee, which has nothing to do with the association, to be foreign funding," Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos, told Vedomosti.

According to a political analyst Alexei Makarkin, the "foreign agent" law was adopted specifically to crack down on Golos, because the association monitored the elections of 2011, "purportedly de-legitimizing them."

"The organization was the main object [of the law,] it was written for this organization, the decision was to either shut it down or compromise it. Later this mechanism was used more widely," Makarkin was cited by Vedomosti as saying.

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