

Russian Election Watchdog Fined as Part of 'Intimidation Campaign'

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A Moscow city court has fined election monitoring group Golos 1.2 million rubles (\$18,000) for failing to identify itself as a “foreign agent” on its website.

Rights activists said the verdict was part of an intimidation campaign ahead of parliamentary elections, the RBC news website reported Monday.

Under a Russian law signed by President Vladimir Putin in 2012, non-governmental organizations that receive funding from abroad and are engaged in any perceived 'political' activities must register as “foreign agents” and identify themselves as such in all publications.

The term dates back to the Soviet era, where it used to refer to spies and other foreign enemies. A number of NGOs in Russia have chosen to shut down rather than carry the label, while others have been fined for failing to comply with the law.

The court decision to fine Golos was made on April 11 in the absence of the organization's representatives, Golos co-chairman Grigory Melkonyants told RBC.

“We only learned that we had been fined on April 14,” said Melkonyants. “Our lawyer went to court to try and find out what happened, and was only allowed to see the case materials the next day.”

A court official told a Golos lawyer that the court bailiff could not find any Golos representatives at the group's address, and was therefore unable to summon them for the hearing, RBC reported.

The fine imposed on Golos is the largest known so far for refusing to carry the 'foreign agent' label, said a leader of the Memorial human rights group, Oleg Orlov. “This is an element of intimidation,” Orlov told RBC.

Orlov's own organization was fined 600,000 rubles (\$9,000) last September for failing to display the ‘foreign agent’ mark, according to media reports. Another human rights organization, Public Verdict, also received a 400,000 ruble (\$6,000) fine in March for the same offense.

The verdict adds to speculation that the Kremlin fears mass protests during election time amid a flagging economy and Western sanctions. Analysts have recently pointed to the new National Guard as a powerful new force designed to disperse any political protests.

Golos plans to appeal the decision.

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