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Independent Election Watchdog Golos Shutters After Co-Chair's Jailing

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Grigory Melkonyants. **EPA / TASS**

The independent election watchdog Golos announced Tuesday that it would shut down, two months after a judge in Moscow sentenced one of its leading members to five years in prison for alleged ties to an "undesirable" organization.

Founded in 2000, Golos had long drawn the Kremlin's ire for documenting widespread election violations, including during the disputed 2011 parliamentary elections, the 2012 presidential race that returned Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin and the 2020 constitutional referendum extending his rule to 2036.

In a statement, Golos said the five-year prison sentence against its co-chair Grigory Melkonyants left it unable to continue its work. In May, a Moscow court found Melkonyants guilty of cooperating with a European election monitoring group blacklisted as an "undesirable" organization in Russia.

"The crackdown on the election monitoring community and the Golos movement is yet

another blow to the constitutional foundations of the country," the organization said. "No evidence of any illegal activity by Golos was presented in court, let alone any harm caused to the interests of the Russian Federation or its citizens."

The "undesirable" label effectively bans an organization from operating inside Russia and exposes its employees and affiliates to potential criminal prosecution.

Related article: 'Find Joy in Everything': Election Monitor Grigory Melkonyants' Last Word in Court

While Golos itself was only labeled a "foreign agent" in 2011, the group said the prosecution of Melkonyants opened a legal gray zone that could expose anyone affiliated with it, even those who simply sought legal advice, to criminal charges.

It warned supporters in Russia to delete past links to its content and avoid sharing its materials online.

Golos said it shuttered all of its regional branches, stopped accepting donations and suspended all projects. The group's initiatives had included training election observers, maintaining a violations hotline and publishing an interactive map of reported election fraud.

The closure announcement comes ahead of regional elections across Russia, scheduled to be held in mid-September.

Russian authorities have used the "undesirable" designation to target opposition groups, foreign organizations and media outlets, including The Moscow Times, since introducing the label in 2015.

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