

Golos Under Fire Due to 'Foreign Agent' Rule

By [The Moscow Times](#)

April 08, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

The Justice Ministry, responsible for overseeing nongovernmental organizations in Russia, claimed that the Golos election watchdog committed an administrative offense by not labeling itself a "foreign agent" despite being engaged in political activity and having received foreign funding.

According to a statement posted on the ministry's website on Tuesday, Golos since 2008 has publicly promoted a unified election code in Russia with the goal of altering existing legislation in Russia.

Thus Golos "receives foreign funding and carries out political activity on the territory of Russia, in other words acts in the capacity of a foreign agent," the statement said.

This is the first instance of the new "foreign agent" law being applied since it was adopted in 2012. The law requires all NGOs that receive funds from abroad and engage in political

activities to register as foreign agents. Leading Russian NGOs pledged to boycott the bill.

According to the law, Golos now faces up to \$16,000 in fines, while its head, Lilia Shibanova, also member of the presidential council for civil society and human rights, may be personally fined up to \$10,000.

Since being founded in 2000, Golos has earned a reputation as one of the leading election watchdogs in Russia, with its elections code being supported by many prominent politicians including former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin.

The organization came under increased government scrutiny after its large-scale observation activities during the 2011 State Duma elections, whose disputed results incited a wave of opposition protests in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities across Russia.

On Monday, Golos deputy director Grigory Melkonyants told The Moscow Times that his organization currently receives foreign funding only for projects dedicated to municipal and civic development.

He denied any engagement in political activities and said the organization had made a decision to not use foreign grants to fund election monitoring.

One of the authors of the foreign agent law told Interfax that opening an administrative case against Golos would make other NGOs register as foreign agents.

According to a Justice Ministry report, as of Jan. 1, there are 219,688 registered NGOs in Russia, including 54 political movements and 25,541 religious organizations.

Last year, the ministry sent 8,916 requests to courts to close NGOs that had allegedly violated legislation.

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