

Golos Ordered Shut for 6 Months

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Independent elections watchdog Golos, which played a prominent role in reporting voting violations in disputed December 2011 parliamentary elections, has been ordered by the Justice Ministry to cease all activities for six months.

In a statement on its website Tuesday, the ministry attributed the decision to the fact that the group failed to register as a "foreign agent" in accordance with the new law on nongovernmental organizations, which requires all organizations that receive foreign funding and conduct "political activity" to register as "foreign agents."

The decision was made on May 25, the statement said, meaning that the activities of Golos are suspended until Dec. 25. During that time, the group is prohibited from holding public events, and its use of bank accounts is limited to paying off debts, fines or other fees.

The suspension could mean that Golos will not be able to organize observers for election day on Sept. 8, when a mayoral vote will be held in Moscow, along with many other elections nationwide.

Golos was the first group to face administrative charges following the introduction of the "foreign agent" law. In mid-June, the Presnensky District Court upheld a May ruling ordering Golos to pay 300,000 rubles (\$9,500) for refusing to register with the Justice Ministry under the law. The group argued that it was not required to do so because it had not received any foreign funding since the law came into effect.

Golos deputy director Grigory Melkonyats said that the Norwegian Helsinki Committee sent the group 7,000 euros by mistake and that the funds had been moved to the bank's transit account as soon as the error was noticed, a statement confirmed by the group's lawyer, who presented supporting documentation.

The ruling was nonetheless upheld, but the organization vowed to continue its work and appeal to the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights.

Golos has been vocal in criticizing Russian elections in recent years, most notably after the December 2011 State Duma elections, which were followed by large-scale protests against electoral fraud.

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