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Russia: Voters' Rights Group First Victim of 'Foreign Agent' Law

(Moscow) The decision of a Moscow court on April 25, 2013 to fine an independent non-governmental organization and its leader is an alarming indicator for the future of civil society in Russia, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today.

The Association in Defence of Voters' Rights Golos (Voice) became the first Russian nongovernmental organizations to fall afoul of the "foreign agents" law. It was fined 300,000 rubles (almost US\$10,000).

Golos played a prominent role in organizing election monitoring and reporting allegations of electoral fraud in the 2011 parliament and 2012 presidential elections.

"The case against Golos should never have been brought let alone succeeded," said John Dalhuisen, director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme. "The foreign agents law is a bad law that was introduced for political reasons. It is sadly not surprising that it has resulted in politically motivated decisions. The foreign agents law is a stick to beat watchdogs with and needs to be repealed."

Golos is alleged to have violated a law introduced in 2012 requiring organizations in receipt of foreign funding to describe themselves as "foreign agents" if they engage in undefined "political activities." The law imposes restrictions on the freedom of association that are inconsistent with international human rights standards.

It is the first organization to face charges since a wave of inspections in recent weeks targeted more than 200 organizations across the country – including the Moscow offices of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The Russian authorities accused Golos of receiving approximately USD\$10,000 in prize money after being presented the Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, though the group instructed its bank to return the money, which it did. The Ministry of Justice claimed that Golos' advocacy for the adoption of a unified Electoral Code sought to "influence public opinion and decisions of government bodies", which, in their opinion, constituted "political activity".

"Today's ruling is a shot across the bow at Russian civil society and a terrible precedent," said Rachel Denber, deputy Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, who attended the hearing. "Russian authorities should withdraw the case against Golos and welcome, rather than hinder, NGO work."

The Golos director, Liliya Shibanova, was also fined 100,000 rubles (approx. US\$3,000).

News of the sanctions against Golos came on April 25, as President Vladimir Putin engaged in a call-in show answering questions from callers across the country.

“At the same time as the court hearing, President Putin was telling the public that organizations highlighting violations should be valued, { Dalhuisen said. “The fines levied against Golos clearly show what their reward will be.”

Another group, the Kostroma Regional Centre for Support of Public Initiatives, will face similar charges on April 29 for having organized a roundtable on US-Russia relations that a US diplomat attended. A further nine groups – whose activities range from ecological initiatives to supporting children with a rare genetic disease – have received official warnings from the prosecutor’s office.

In reports published on April 24, *Freedom under threat: The clampdown on freedom of expression, assembly and association in Russia*, and *Laws of Attrition : Crackdown on Russia’s Civil Society after Putin’s Return to the Presidency*, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, respectively, noted that the systematic undermining and violation of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association have been the hallmark of President Putin’s human rights record during the first year of his third term.