

Criminalizing Election Monitors: Russian Court Sentences Golos Co-Chair to 5 Years in Prison

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“Some may find it boring, but the kind of society we all dream of is impossible without fair laws and a transparent process that works.”

– Grigory Melkonyants in his closing statement of his criminal case.

EPDE condemns today’s verdict handed down by Judge Evgeniya Nikolaeva, sentencing Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of the Russian election observation group Golos, to five years in prison. The charges—centered around “organizing the work of an ,undesirable organization”—are politically motivated and represent yet another blow to civil society in Russia.

The “undesirable” organization label is a tool of repression introduced by Russian authorities in 2015, designed to eliminate independent voices under the guise of national security. What we are witnessing is the systematic dismantling of civic space, a model that is now dangerously gaining traction in other countries facing authoritarian regression, such as Georgia.

Grigory Melkonyants has been detained since August 2023. His sentencing today is not only an attack on an individual but a warning to all who stand up for transparent and democratic elections.

As a fellow election monitoring organization based in Europe, we express our full solidarity with Melkonyants and all observers targeted for carrying out their legitimate, internationally recognized work.

“Election observers are frontline defenders of democracy and, as such, are often among the first to be targeted by authoritarian regimes. The United Nations recognize election observers as human rights defenders, entitled to full protection under international law. We must not remain silent in the face of this injustice. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of Grigory Melkonyants.” – Stefanie Schiffer, EPDE Chair of Board

This verdict is yet another reminder of persecution of civil society actors in Russia.

We urge European institutions, governments, and democratic actors globally to speak out forcefully and increase protection of election observers worldwide.