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EU statement on the administrative fines against “GOLOS”

The European Union would like to draw the attention of the OSCE Permanent Council to the statement of 28 April by the spokesperson of High Representative Catherine Ashton expressing strong concerns at the recent judgments imposing fines on the civil society organization “GOLOS” and its director Ms Lilia Shibanova, as well as the obligation on GOLOS to register as a “Foreign Agent”.

The EU believes that the activities of GOLOS – neutral monitoring of elections and submitting technical legal advice – aim at contributing to enhanced electoral transparency and to the improvement of the overall electoral framework in the Russian Federation. These activities directly support the implementation of international commitments to hold free and fair elections to which Russia has agreed, notably within the Council of Europe and the OSCE. To brand the neutral monitoring of an electoral process as “political activity” is particularly troubling to the EU.

The ruling by Moscow’s Presnensky District Court against GOLOS makes it the first NGO to face administrative charges under the new “Foreign Agent” law and confirms widespread worries inside and outside Russia regarding its implementation. Moreover, the ruling raises legal concerns about the retroactive application of the law. Although formal justification of the court decision is not yet available, the EU notes with concern that its financial contribution to civil society projects in the past has been extensively referred to by the judge in arguing the application of the new legislation against an independent non-governmental organization.

The EU has repeatedly expressed its concerns about growing pressure on civil society, the recent wave of restrictive legislation on NGOs and the widespread checks on their activities. The EU will continue to monitor developments closely.

The Acceding Country Croatia*, the Candidate Countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Montenegro*, and Iceland+, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

* Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Montenegro continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.