

Foreign Ministry Accuses USAID of Meddling in Politics

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USAID staff assisting the operation to extinguish wildfires that swept through western Russia in summer 2010.

Moscow's abrupt decision to kick out the U.S. Agency for International Development raised new worries Wednesday about a widening crackdown on pro-democracy groups.

The Foreign Ministry bluntly accused the agency, better known as USAID, of meddling in domestic politics.

Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Wednesday that the agency had been ordered to close by Oct. 1 because its work had deviated from its stated goals.

“This means attempts to exert influence via the distribution of grants upon political processes, including elections at various levels and on the institutions of civil society,” he said in a video message on the ministry's website.

Lukashevich also said that USAID's activities in several regions, especially the North Caucasus, had raised serious questions and that the Americans had been warned earlier about the government's concerns.

Moscow's decision seemed to deal a sharp blow to the U.S.-Russian reset, which has been championed by President Barack Obama but has not been met with much enthusiasm by the Kremlin since Vladimir Putin took over the presidency in May.

During the presidential campaign, Putin accused the U.S. State Department of financing the opposition through grants to nongovernmental organizations like elections watchdog Golos. During his first three months as president, he signed a series of laws that clamped down on his critics, including a law that forces NGOs to call themselves "foreign agents" if they engage in politics and accept foreign funding.

The exact legal basis for the decision to close USAID's office was unclear Wednesday. The Foreign Ministry's statement contrasted with comments by Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, who suggested that there was no basis for it.

"Like all foreign agencies that finance Russian NGOs, USAID has to comply with Russian legal norms. As long as the Americans comply ... we cannot make any decision to end their activities on our territory," he was quoted [as saying](#) by Kommersant.

The Kremlin did not respond to questions sent by e-mail. U.S. Embassy spokespeople referred all questions to the Foreign Ministry, which did not respond to repeated telephone calls.

Curiously, not even Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov could explain the situation. Asked to comment on USAID, Konovalov told Interfax that he was not familiar enough with the case. "I have not seen the whole account about this organization," he said.

Experts contacted by the Moscow Times suggested that a bilateral agreement over the agency's presence in the country was running out.

Sergei Markov, a former State Duma deputy for United Russia and an expert on NGO policy, said that the basic agreement for USAID had run out two years ago. "The U.S. should have worked out a new one, but they haven't," he said by telephone.

Markov, who is vice rector of the Plekhanov Institute, said that if Washington showed political will and approved a new agreement, USAID's local office could resume its work.

But he also said that the agency was being punished for its political activities in other countries. He said U.S. grants had helped to prop up "undemocratic regimes" in Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states. "We cannot believe that someone who supports war criminals like Saakashvili can be interested in developing democracy in Russia," Markov said, referring to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

While many of USAID's 57 Russian partners expressed dismay at the possible consequences of the closure, Washington's official stance was markedly soft.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland merely said late Tuesday that Moscow had made a "sovereign decision" when it told the U.S. that USAID needs to close its office in

Russia.

She also suggested that the money spent on Russia could be redirected elsewhere. “There are a lot of countries out there that would like more of the kinds of support that we were doing in Russia,” she told reporters in Washington, according to a State Department [transcript](#).

USAID, which has a mandate to support U.S. foreign policy and has spent more than \$2.6 billion over the past 20 years in Russia, says on its [home page](#) that it has been “a proud supporter of Russia’s oldest human rights organizations” and supported civic watchdog groups that have “provided non-partisan oversight over electoral processes.”

In 2011, the agency spent \$54.2 million in the country, almost half of which (\$22.2 million) went into projects related to human rights, democracy and governance, [according](#) to official data.

However, official figures also show that planned spending has consistently declined from \$81 million in 2008 to \$52 million for 2013.

Nuland, the State Department spokeswoman, said that she hopes that the “Russian government now takes forward that work itself, particularly in environment and health,” but added that Washington will “continue to work on civil society issues and democracy issues.”

Foreign Ministry spokesman Lukashovich said Russia was now a donor country and could give up its receiver status in international organizations. “Russian civil society has matured and no longer needs ‘external management,’” he said.

Some analysts argued that it was a good sign if NGOs looked for donations and volunteers domestically. “A civil society that does not rely on foreign grants is significantly more dangerous than one that does because it enjoys greater legitimacy and is harder to discredit and strangle,” Sam Greene, a visiting U.S. professor at Moscow’s New Economic School, said in e-mailed comments.

Others, however, warned that it would be politically naive to believe that Russian money would replace USAID.

“There simply is no money for certain projects perceived as countering official policies, including a range of environmental issues,” said Jens Siegert, the head of the Moscow office for Germany’s Boell Foundation.

Ivan Blokov, a senior activist with Greenpeace Russia, said that it was extremely difficult to get funding from Russian donors for critical issues like pollution. “Large corporations will hardly engage in anything countering state policy,” he said.

Greenpeace Russia only raises 15 percent of its funding domestically, and there are few wealthy people among its 6,000 Russian donors, Blokov said. He added that USAID was not among its foreign sponsors because Greenpeace does not accept government money out of principle.

Yelena Zhemkova, the head of Memorial, which focuses on recording the Soviet Union’s totalitarian past, said that USAID currently provides 40 percent of her organization’s annual

budget of \$1.2 million and that it would be “very complicated” to replace the money. (Her organization is not to be confused with the human rights group with the same name and also gets USAID.)

Zhemkova said that the difficulties with domestic fundraising were rooted in the jailing of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who funded opposition parties before his politically tinged arrest in 2003.

“He was punished to show others they are not free to do what they want,” Zhemkova said. “Many rich people learned that lesson.”

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