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USAID Exit to Hit Small Organizations Hard

By Jonathan Earle

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Yulia Simonova of disabled rights group Perspektiva seen in her office. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

The government has refused to backtrack on a demand that the U.S. Agency for International Development cease operations in the country by Oct. 1, despite laments from nongovernmental groups and a reported request for an extension from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"We're standing by our position. The decision has been made, and the decision of a sovereign state should be carried out in full. Our American colleagues have given us such assurances," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Thursday, Interfax reported.

Lukashevich refused to confirm or deny a report by the Kommersant daily published Thursday that Clinton had asked for the deadline to be moved to May 2013.

He also accused U.S. officials of distorting events by portraying the Kremlin's decision as a

surprise. He said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had informed Clinton of the move on June 29, not on Sept. 8, as a senior U.S. administration official said Tuesday.

Russian NGOs described USAID's exit as a major blow that would hit small, regional and nonpolitical organizations particularly hard.

Ironically, many of these NGOs are not apparently the ones that have vexed the government, which has said organizations supported by USAID have repeatedly tried to influence political processes, contrary to their stated aims.

Russian authorities have not specified which groups it believes attempted to meddle in domestic politics, but some NGOs that receive U.S. grants have consistently been the subject of official ire, in particular elections watchdog Golos.

USAID spent $54.2 million in Russia in 2011, almost half of which ($22.2 million) went into projects related to human rights, democracy and governance, according to official data.

"It was probably a mistake of USAID to concentrate primarily on Golos, Memorial, the Moscow Helsinki Group — organizations that I, of course, respect," said Yelena Malitskaya, president of the Siberian Civic Initiatives Support Center.

Memorial and the Moscow Helsinki Group are both prominent organizations that support human rights.

The Russia office of USAID, which is staffed by 13 Americans and 60 Russians, currently works with 57 Russian partners.

NGOs said they would do everything possible to keep operations open and to search for new funds.

On Thursday, Golos struck a defiant tone in a statement titled "No Matter What, Golos Will Observe Elections."

The organization, which has received USAID funding since 2002, said it would go through with a large-scale vote-monitoring project, covering 22 regions, for Oct. 14 local and regional elections.

Golos's monitoring program this time around will include a map of election violations, a free hotline, legal consultations, and training programs for observers, the statement said.

Denise Roza of Perspektiva, which works to support the rights of the disabled, said her organization was set to lose almost a third of its income and would be forced to delay or eliminate a program to promote inclusive employment for people with disabilities in five regions.

"There's no funding for employment for people with disabilities. The government gives grants every year to the same big three organizations," she said, referring to three national societies for the blind, deaf and disabled.

Roza said USAID funding has been critical to lobbying for inclusive education, a system under

which children with disabilities would study side by side with children without disabilities.

"The whole big movement that we've established throughout Russia, this inclusive education movement, is in part thanks to USAID's funding," she said by telephone Thursday.

USAID was among the rare donors that covered institutional costs — salaries, rent, supplies and travel — and not simply direct project costs, Yelena Panfilova, head of the Russia office of anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, said.

Panfilova said other donors also have a bias against one-time expenditures, which can include medicine, wheelchairs and the construction of ramps, meaning that USAID's departure could have a skewed impact on health programs aimed at combatting HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

"This is very bad, because mostly small organizations run these programs, regional organizations. They're not very publicized or well-known," she said by telephone.

For example, USAID was the only source of financing for the University Research Company in Russia, which works on improving healthcare services for mothers, newborns and other children, as well as for patients with HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

"We've halted everything," Victor Boguslavsky, URC's Russia country director, said by telephone Thursday.

Pyatigorsk-based Faith, Hope, Love, which provides services to socially vulnerable groups, including migrants and pensioners, said that they would have to cut back on their activities as a result of the decision.

"Many people won't get help, ... many social issues will remain unresolved, many groups will no longer be able to receive help from our organization," Faith, Hope, Love chairwoman Anastasia Ponomaryova said in e-mailed comments.

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 website 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."

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

It's not the first U.S. aid organization to get the boot in recent memory.

In 2002, Peace Corps volunteers were declared unwelcome after the Federal Security Service accused them of snooping on Russian officials instead of fulfilling their self-stated mission of promoting world peace and friendship through volunteerism.

Earlier this year, the government passed a tough new law that forces NGOs that accept funding from abroad and engage in "political activity" to don the label "foreign agent."

In theory, the United States could move funds into Russia via other channels, said Miriam Lanskoy, director for Russia and Eurasia programs for the organization National Endowment

for Democracy, which receives U.S. government funding.

Other possible sources of funding for groups focused on human rights and democracy include the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and NGOs such as NED or human rights group Freedom House, she said.

"There are a lot of questions that haven't been answered. Will people be able to finish the projects that they have now? Will USAID support continue through other mechanisms?" she said.

NED, which doesn't have an office in Russia, spends about $2.5 million on grants to Russian organizations including Golos, the Memorial Human Rights Center, and the Center for Social and Labor Rights, which also receive USAID funds.

"Theoretically the U.S. government has other ways of doing this, and they have to figure out which way they want to go," she said.

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