

Obama Must Take On Putin

By [David J. Kramer](#)

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Since the summer, we have seen President Vladimir Putin take the first two steps in his campaign to destroy Russian civil society. The first came when he signed legislation requiring Russian nongovernmental organizations that engage in what authorities consider "political activities" and that receive foreign funding be branded as "foreign agents." Last week, the U.S. State Department announced Putin's second step: his request that the U.S. Agency for International Development, which has been in Russia for nearly two decades, pack up and leave.

His next step may be to ban all foreign funding of Russian NGOs, even from private sources. Against the backdrop of Putin's broader crackdown in the country, with the most recent example being efforts to expand the definition of treason, these steps should not have been a surprise.

What is surprising is how the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama seems willing to go along with Putin's plan without any serious pushback. The latest episode involving USAID is particularly disturbing and raises a number of unanswered questions:

- Why did the U.S. State Department announce Russia's decision on USAID? Shouldn't that have been the responsibility of the Russian side?

"The United States recently received the Russian government's decision to end USAID activities in the Russian Federation," the three-sentence State Department statement began. It would have been more appropriate if the Kremlin or the Foreign Ministry had announced this decision, and it would have been interesting to see how they portrayed it. Instead, the Obama administration misguidedly took it upon itself to break the news, making life easier for Putin.

- Why did the State Department's announcement use such unwarranted restraint? There was not a word of criticism, regret or disappointment in explaining that the Russian government had given USAID less than a month to clear out of Moscow. Even when a reporter explicitly asked, "Are you extremely disappointed or disappointed at all in the Russians' decision?" the department's spokeswoman fell back on the line that this was a "sovereign decision that any country makes."

When the Foreign Ministry got around to commenting on the situation a day later, its spokesman offered no reciprocal restraint whatsoever and instead trashed the work of USAID, saying it "did not always meet the stated purposes of contributing to the development of bilateral humanitarian cooperation" and "raised serious questions, which we have repeatedly warned our U.S. colleagues about."

- Did the U.S. ever consider pushing back in a serious way on Putin's request? Based on my conversations with people involved, this was not given much, if any, consideration. Much is at stake: Disruptions in USAID funding threaten the very existence of a number of Russian organizations that depend on outside support and have no domestic alternatives to fill the void.

Given how much time and energy Obama has spent on the "reset" policy and that the request to close USAID came from Putin directly, it does not seem unreasonable to have asked the U.S. president to place a call to his Russian counterpart to argue against such a move. Demonstrating firmness at this level might have induced Putin to back off. Instead, U.S. acceptance of the shutdown will likely be viewed by Putin as weakness and an invitation to crack down on human rights and civil society initiatives even further.

- Since the Russian decision essentially made the 13 Americans working at the USAID mission personae non grata, what reciprocation is the U.S. considering, if any? Usually when it comes to expulsions, the other side responds by kicking out a comparable number of people. While the Russian government does not have a USAID equivalent in its Washington embassy, it does have a massive presence and thus a full roster from which the State Department can choose.
- Did the U.S. ever think about the precedent it is setting in so meekly accepting the Russian decision? Repressive regimes around the world are watching how this plays

out in Russia.

Putin may very well be telling his colleagues in Astana, Kiev and Baku, for example, that they, too, should kick out USAID and that there will be no consequences under Obama for doing so. If leaders in those countries do so, it will make it exponentially harder for the State Department and USAID to deliver on their promises to find other ways to support Russian civil society.

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