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U.S. Says United Russia Took Aid Funds

By Jonathan Earle

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The U.S. says United Russia used development funds from Washington. **Denis Grishkin**

United Russia officials bristled at an accusation by the U.S. State Department that the party had been a recipient of U.S. aid funds, calling it groundless, while the opposition seized on the information as a demonstration of hypocrisy by the party.

The potentially embarrassing charge comes after Russia announced last week that it was kicking out the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, for funding groups that the Russian government, including United Russia officials, says have tried to interfere in domestic politics.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said at a press briefing Thursday that United Russia has participated "over the years" in programs sponsored by the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, or NDI.

Both those groups rely on U.S. government funds and both support nongovernmental organizations that have been irksome to the Kremlin, including pro-democracy, vote-

monitoring and human rights groups.

Ruling party leaders have often accused government critics — from USAID-funded NGOs to opposition leaders — of being paid U.S. agents bent on regime change.

Nuland did not mention any specific instances of United Russia, or party members, accepting U.S. funds, and party officials were quick to condemn the charge as baseless retaliation.

"This announcement looks like a groundless and emotional reaction issued in a fit of pique," Alexei Chesnakov, a high-ranking United Russia official, wrote on the party's official website.

Chesnakov and other officials said United Russia as a party had never accepted U.S. funds.

But an NDI spokeswoman said Friday that individual United Russia members have participated in events and training sessions funded with U.S. money, meaning that the party members' travel, accommodations and other costs were sometimes bankrolled by U.S. taxpayers.

"Representatives of the United Russia party and their affiliates regularly participate [in NDI projects]," NDI spokeswoman Kathy Gest said in e-mailed comments Friday.

"All of these activities are conducted on a multipartisan basis. NDI reaches out to partners from across the civic and political spectrum," she said, adding that her group did not fund political parties or carry out training programs for individual parties.

Opposition activists jumped on the report, accusing United Russia of hypocrisy, and at least two activists provided what they said was evidence that United Russia members had taken U.S. funds.

Veteran opposition leader Boris Nemtsov on Friday published a list of eight instances dating back to 2006 in which United Russia members appear to have accepted U.S. funds, primarily in connection with International Republican Institute-backed training sessions and forums.

In one instance, Nemtsov wrote, United Russia's Primorye region chief sent a party youth leader to a training conference for politically active women in May 2010. The event was sponsored by IDI, which paid for travel and accommodations.

But the youth leader, Yulia Yakovenko, participated as a private citizen, not as a representative of the party, she said. She added that regional party boss Igor Kovalyov may have recommended her, but he did not "send" her.

"They invited several young people from the Primorye region on the basis of their political activism, not their party affiliation," Yakovenko said by telephone on Friday. She characterized the conference as an opportunity to learn about political practices abroad.

NDI projects help community groups work with governments, support youth debates and community projects, and share the best international practices on civic engagements, Gest said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department has revealed that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

asked Russia for more time to wind down USAID operations. Russia has set a deadline of Oct. 1 for the aid organization to cease its local activities.

"As you can imagine, this doesn't just affect the American staff. There's a huge amount of Russian staff involved, so we have to unwind things there," Nuland said at a press briefing. But there will be "no new contracting, no new programming, as of Oct. 1," she said.

Nuland refused to confirm or deny a Kommersant report that said Clinton proposed a May 2013 deadline for closing the USAID office.

The U.S. Embassy announced Tuesday that Russia was pulling the plug on USAID, which has operated in Russia since 1992 and spent a combined $2.6 billion on civil society grants in the country.

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

Several Russian NGOs that have accepted USAID grants have come under intense criticism in recent months. Vote monitor Golos, which condemned irregularities during federal elections in December and March, was the subject of a seething "exposO" on national TV.

Earlier this year, the manager of President Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign told Izvestia that three prominent Washington-based NGOs — the Henry M. Jackson Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy — were among the biggest threats to Putin's re-election.

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