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Obama Caves In to Kremlin Repression

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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As the U.S. presidential election approaches, President Barack Obama's "reset" with Russia has been dealt two painful blows, both of which are either directly or indirectly the fault of the Obama administration. After working in Russia since 1992, USAID was ordered to close the doors of its Moscow office by Monday. Meanwhile, U.S. government-funded Radio Liberty will also close down its radio broadcasting effective Nov. 10. Freedom and democracy in Russia has suffered two major setbacks, only worsening the situation with freedom of speech and human rights.

USAID, established in 1961 by U.S. President John F. Kennedy, was literally thrown out of Russia with a hard kick in the rear. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was shocked to hear from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the APEC summit in Vladivostok in early September that the decision had been made in the Kremlin to kick USAID out of the country in a matter of weeks.

Yet the Obama administration did not object to the decision. The only appeal it made was to ask for an extension of USAID's presence until May. But in the tradition of Soviet-era Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Russia once again said "Nyet!" USAID employees were told

to pack their bags and leave Russia by Oct. 1.

In addition, Radio Liberty has shut down its radio operations and will shift to an Internet format. Radio Liberty president Steven Korn explained the move as a way to make its broadcasting format more modern. But regardless of how Korn tries to spin it, the shutdown will be a blow to freedom of the media in Russia. The "modernization" amounted to firing dozens of outstanding journalists, including Mikhail Sokolov, Anna Kachakayeva and Lyudmila Telen. Once a powerful radio station that millions of Russians tuned in to for alternative views and discussions will be diluted by key staff reductions and lost in the huge expanse of the Internet.

During its 20 years in Russia, USAID offered grants of more than $2.6 billion to hundreds of NGOs. In recent years, more than half of the funding was spent to support democracy and human rights. Recipients included Memorial, which defends human rights and educates Russians on the horrendous crimes committed by the Soviet Union; Golos, which provides training to election observers and fights election fraud; and the Moscow Helsinki Group, which has fought for human rights in Russia since the days of Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Yury Andropov.

As of Nov. 1, those organizations, along with hundreds of other Russian NGOs that receive grants from foreign donors, will be required by a recently passed law to stigmatize themselves as "foreign agents." Now those NGOs have been dealt the most serious blow by being denied the financial support of their largest donor. In the end, civil society will suffer.

Not only the so-called politically oriented NGOs came under attack, but also the social programs funded by USAID. These include projects ranging from the fight against AIDS and tuberculosis to assistance for the disabled and the protection of the environment. Thousands of Russians will now be denied vital aid simply because the Kremlin has deemed that they should not receive it. The Russian authorities explain that they rejected U.S. humanitarian aid because Russia has "gotten up off its knees." Try telling that to the thousands of Russian children who die every year because they can't receive basic medial care, or to the country's AIDS and tuberculosis patients who don't have access to medication.

In response to the aggressive anti-democratic campaign led by Putin and members of his chekist clan, the Obama administration continues its cowardly retreat from its democratic principles. It did not make a single attempt to preserve Radio Liberty or the USAID mission in Russia. As a result, Radio Liberty, which once hosted such talents as poet and playwright Alexander Galich and author Sergei Dovlatov, is being systematically destroyed. Millions of Russians who want a more democratic Russia have been betrayed and abandoned, while dozens of NGOs of critical importance to Russian civil society will be severely curtailed or closed outright.

Although the Obama administration has said it is committed to defending freedom and human rights in the world, it has meekly given in to the Kremlin on two key institutions that have made invaluable contributions toward building democracy and civil society in Russia.

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