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Amid Crackdown on NGOs, U.S. Group Moves Staff Out of Russia

By Jonathan Earle

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U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul co-founded the National Democratic Institute's Moscow office in 1992 to support and strengthen democratic institutions in Russia. **Maxim Stulov**

The National Democratic Institute, or NDI, a U.S. based nonprofit that promotes democratic development, has moved its Russia country director and other senior staff to Lithuania, amid an unpredictable and increasingly hostile climate for NGO workers in Russia.

The organization, which is partly funded by the U.S. government, fired support staff and moved Russia country director Reid Nelson to Vilnius, leaving a bookkeeper and a small number of other employees in Moscow, where it has maintained an office since 1992.

"Our commitment to Russia remains solid and strong. We just felt it necessary to inject a little more certainty into the situation and reduce our presence on the ground," Nelson told The Moscow Times by telephone on Thursday.

The move, which Nelson said was voluntary and likely temporary, seemed to reflect a growing fear that Russia is no longer safe for so-called "political" NGOs due to new laws that widen the definition of treason and require certain foreign-backed groups to call themselves "foreign agents."

Lawmakers swiftly approved the new regulations with the Kremlin's blessing this summer following Vladimir Putin's inauguration as president in May.

Individuals with intimate knowledge of the situation with NDI said the Kremlin's decision earlier this year to expel USAID, the U.S. government agency that provides development grants, and the new laws were compounded by years of harassment by pro-Kremlin forces and convinced NDI administrators to act.

The Kremlin has made little secret of its disdain for NGOs that loudly criticize the country's leaders and political system, many of which receive at least some foreign funding.

In a speech in November, Putin accused the West of giving certain NGOs instructions to influence elections in Russia, comparing those who take foreign grants to Judas.

USAID's forced departure on Oct. 1 was widely seen as linked to the agency's funding of Golos, an election-monitoring group that slammed federal elections in December as seriously flawed, a charge that helped fuel massive street protests.

NDI promotes democratic values in Russia by co-organizing events and training sessions for citizens, local groups and decision-makers from across the political spectrum.

The organization played a major role in creating and training Golos in the early 2000s.

Nelson said the move of senior staff to Vilnius would not disrupt NDI's operations in Russia, which were already increasingly moving online in an effort to reach a larger audience.

"The most you can reach at any seminar is about 30 people. ... Online modules for election observer training have been accessed by 40,000 or 50,000 people," he said.

But others criticized the decision as baffling and even cowardly, especially given that a similar organization, the International Republican Institute, or IRI, hasn't transferred staff out of Russia.

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, who as an NDI field representative helped establish the organization's Moscow office in 1992, privately described NDI's retreat as a mistake, according to a person familiar with the situation who was not authorized to speak to the press.

From 1990 to 1996, McFaul worked as an NDI consultant, according to a copy of his resume posted on the website of Stanford University, where McFaul is a professor of political science.

"NDI is his family. He tries to be fair ... but he loves them," the person said.

A U.S. Embassy representative referred questions about NDI to the organization.

Sergei Markov, a former State Duma Deputy who worked as a consultant for NDI from 1990

to 1999, also criticized the move. "USAID isn't allowed to work here, but nobody chased NDI out," he said by telephone on Wednesday.

But NDI has reason to be concerned about the safety of its staff. For years, the organization has been smeared in pro-Kremlin media outlets and has complained about harassment from government-linked forces.

Venues for NDI events have been mysteriously closed, electronic communications monitored, and employees singled out by customs officials, said a former employee, who worked for NDI in the late 2000s and requested anonymity to avoid "troubles."

In January 2009, Russian employees at USAID received an e-mail with an image of a senior NDI official reclining with an underage child, accompanied by a message, ostensibly from a Russian citizen, that accused the official of raping her 9-year-old daughter.

In a secret diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow said the photo was photoshopped and referred to the photo and e-mail as a "personal smear attack" that it believed was the work of the Federal Security Service.

"[NDI] lost its cool and left," veteran opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said by telephone on Thursday.

NDI employees are not the only NGO workers to have come under pressure of late.

On Wednesday morning, activists at the Russian groups Memorial and For Human Rights discovered the words "foreign agent" spray-painted onto buildings that house their offices.

"There's a paranoid man in power, a mentally ill man. Everywhere he looks, he sees only spies, agents and traitors," said Nemtsov, a co-leader of the Republican Party — People's Freedom Party.

Even though Nelson will be stationed in Vilnius for the time being, he stressed the importance of face-to-face relationships in Russia, which he said would continue despite the distance.

But the person familiar with the circumstances surrounding NDI's departure doubted that they would return.

"If they were scared before the NGO and treason laws came into effect, why would they be less scared now that the laws are in place?" the person said.

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