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Raids on German NGOs May Harm Ties, Berlin Says

By The Moscow Times

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BERLIN — Germany complained to Russia on Tuesday about a series of tax raids on nongovernmental organizations, including two German think tanks, saying the action could harm bilateral ties already strained by the Cyprus crisis.

The tax inspections of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) appear to be part of a wider ongoing probe by Moscow of Russian and Western NGOs that activists say is aimed at stifling political dissent.

The KAS is linked to Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), and the FES is close to Germany's main opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD).

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle called in the number two diplomat at Russia's embassy in Berlin to relay his "concern over the concerted action" by Russian tax authorities, the foreign ministry said on Twitter.

"Hampering the activity of German foundations could inflict lasting damage on bilateral relations. We have made this clear to the Russian side," a German diplomat told Spiegel Online.

Since returning to the Kremlin last May, President Vladimir Putin has signed laws to tighten controls on NGOs, requiring those with foreign funding to register as "foreign agents," a term echoing Cold War era hostilities.

The Kremlin says the legislation is needed to prevent groups from spying for foreign governments, but Putin's critics see the raids by state authorities, ranging from tax officials to fire inspectors, as harassment.

Russian state prosecutors and the Justice Ministry could not immediately be reached Tuesday for comment on the raids. The ministry said Monday that the searches authorities have been conducting were aimed at checking the groups' "compliance with statutory goals and with Russian law."

Germany's Christian Democrats said Russian authorities had seized computers in the KAS's St. Petersburg office in what it said was a "totally unacceptable" action.

"The political foundations from Germany are making an important contribution to the development of democratic structures, the building of a state based on law and the encouragement of civil society," CDU general secretary Hermann Groehe said in a statement.

"We urge the Russian authorities to immediately stop interference with the work of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation," he added.

A spokesman for the FES in Berlin said the foundation's Moscow office had received another visit from tax inspectors on Tuesday, though he added he would not call it a "raid" but a previously agreed appointment.

"We expect that after these checks, we will be able to continue the full range of our activities in the Russian Federation," FES's Reinhard Krumm said in a separate statement.

Economic ties between Germany and Russia are booming and Putin has said bilateral trade in 2011 totaled $72 billion, but Merkel has sharply criticized Moscow's clampdown on dissent.

Russia is also angry over the euro zone's handling of the financial crisis in Cyprus where uninsured depositors in the island's banks — many of them wealthy Russians — will now lose billions of euros under the terms of a bailout.

Germany, long critical of Cyprus's status as a tax haven for Russians and others, has led calls for wealthier bank depositors to contribute to the plan to rescue the island from bankruptcy.

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