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U.S. State Department Offers Grants to Improve U.S.-Russia Ties

By The Moscow Times

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The U.S. State Department has announced a grant competition for Russian and American organizations to create programs aimed at improving bilateral relations, which have grown tense since Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin last year.

Grants of up to $100,000 will be awarded to noncommercial organizations for creating meetings, virtual interactions, exchanges and internships between Americans and Russians, a U.S. government website for the program said.

The closing date for applications is indicated as Aug. 12 on the website, but the U.S. Embassy in Moscow asks on its website for applicants to submit proposals by July 26.

The U.S. announcement about the competition, called the U.S.-Russia Peer-to-Peer Dialogue Program, comes amid what critics have called a crackdown by Russian authorities on nongovernmental organizations that uncover human rights abuses, especially those receiving

foreign funding.

In November, a Russian law took effect that obliges NGOs that receive foreign funding and are involved in broadly defined "political activity" to register as "foreign agents" under threat of fines or suspension of their activities.

The website for the U.S. State Department program said the grant proposals do not need to be political, and it makes no mention of the Russian laws regulating any project that would receive its funds.

Many Russian NGOs have refused to comply with the "foreign agents" law, saying that they are not involved in political activities or that the "foreign agent" label unfairly connotes that they are spies.

Since November, of 2,000 NGOs across the country, 36 groups have had legal action brought against them, according to Agora, a group that provides legal assistance to other NGOs. Last week, Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika told Putin that 215 nongovernmental organizations had bypassed the law by refusing to register as foreign agents.

Independent elections watchdog Golos, which played a prominent role in reporting voting violations in the disputed December 2011 parliamentary elections, was in June ordered by the Justice Ministry to cease all activities for six months. Golos was the first to be fined for not complying with the "foreign agents" law, receiving a bill of 300,000 rubles ($10,000) in April.

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