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Russia Suspends U.S.-Backed Education NGO's Activities

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Russia has ordered a U.S.-sponsored education program to cease operations on its territory amid rising tensions between the two countries over the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

The Justice Ministry told American Councils — a Washington-based NGO that runs educational exchange programs — that it cannot operate in Russia while its registration is being renewed, said regional director Carter Johnson, Voice of America reported Wednesday.

Expats currently working for the organization are expected to leave Russia pending the program's re-registration, Johnson added.

Before issuing the order, the Justice Ministry reportedly asked the agency to provide an activity report for the past six months and to submit a plan of operations for the next six months — the first time in the company's history that it had been asked to provide such documentation, American Councils said.

Some observers have linked the Justice Ministry's order to a speech given by President

Vladimir Putin earlier this month in which he called on security officials to be wary of "destructive" activities on the part of foreign nongovernmental organizations.

"We will not accept a situation like what happened in Ukraine, when in many cases it was through nongovernmental organizations that the nationalist and neo-Nazi groups and militants, who became the shock troops in the anti-constitutional coup d'etat, received funding from abroad," Putin told the Federal Security Service.

Western leaders have dismissed Putin's claims, and blame Russia's annexation of Crimea in February for the recent spike in tensions.

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