

Russia expels USAID

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The Russian government has ordered that the US development agency, USAID, leave Russia by 1 October. This means that USAID will cut its financial support for the projects it had been backing in Russia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on 19 September that the nature of the work of USAID had gone beyond the declared humanitarian issues, and the grants it offered were an instrument for influencing political processes, including elections.

USAID has been present in Russia for twenty years, and spent a total of US\$2.7 billion on various projects over this period (the budget for 2012 was US\$50 million). The initiatives financed by this agency include well-known organisations engaged in socio-political and educational activity, such as the election watchdog organisation Golos, Memorial, or the Moscow Helsinki Group. At the same time, USAID supported programmes promoting entrepreneurship and organisations engaged in charity (offering aid to children's homes and handicapped children), health issues (AIDS and tuberculosis prevention and treatment), ecology, etc. According to information from the spokesperson for the US Department of State, Victoria Nuland, the "party of power", United Russia also received USAID grants for years.

Commentary

- The expulsion of USAID from Russia fits in with the Kremlin's strategy aimed at torpedoing increasing public activity, which is seen as a threat to the stability of Vladimir Putin's rule. This activity is perceived by the government not as a sign of the development of civil society but rather as a consequence of Western interference with Russian internal affairs. This is yet another move by Putin of this kind aimed against Western-funded non-governmental organisations since resuming the presidency. In July this year, such organisations were formally granted the status of 'foreign agents' and their activity became the subject of tighter supervision. In turn, on 21 September, amendments to the criminal code were adopted in the first reading (the articles on spying and treason), introducing a much broader definition of 'spying', which now includes for example "providing assistance in the form of information, funds and consultation to Western and international organisations", for which long prison sentences can be imposed. These amendments will provide the government with a new instrument for fighting the most active social organisations, bloggers and election watchdogs.

- One of the reasons for this hasty expulsion of USAID from Russia may be the desire to prevent the upcoming regional elections (scheduled for 14 October) from being monitored by the election watchdog organisation Golos, which has been financed by USAID since 2002. Golos has been watching elections and revealing violations of democratic electoral standards for more than ten years. This organisation has admitted that the lack of funding from USAID may partly restrict its ability to monitor elections, but it also has announced that it will now be searching for funds inside Russia.
- Although the Russian government took the decision on USAID mainly in view of domestic affairs, it fits in with the deteriorating atmosphere in Russia-US relations. The potential of the Russian-US 'reset' was exhausted already in late 2010/early 2011, although Dmitri Medvedev until the last days of his presidency presented it as one of the key achievements in Russian foreign policy. Since Putin returned to the Kremlin, Russia has lost interest in maintaining the impression of good bilateral relations and has been using ever more restrictive measures in domestic policy, regardless of criticism from the West, and especially the USA.

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