

American NGOs pull out of Russia

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26 February 2013

A series of events over the past two months point to a marked deterioration in US-Russian relations. The much-hyped “reset” in relations, declared jointly by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March 2009, has proved to be ephemeral.

Late last year, President Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act into law, legislation titled in honor of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer for Hermitage Capital Management, an international financial company based on the English Channel island of Guernsey. As part of a falling-out between Hermitage executives and Russian government officials, the former were accused of tax evasion and tax fraud. Magnitsky was held in jail in Russia without trial for nearly a year, during which time he became sick and died in late 2009 as a result of being denied proper medical care.

Although Magnitsky’s treatment at the hands of the Russian criminal justice system violated his basic rights, it was not extraordinary under the prison conditions prevalent in Russia, or the United States for that matter, where detainees are regularly brutalized through neglect, overcrowding and outright violence. Despite this, Magnitsky’s death was made into a cause célèbre by the international press and has been the subject of denunciations by leading politicians both in the United States and countries aligned with US policy. The Magnitsky Act blocks Russian officials involved in Magnitsky’s arrest, prosecution and detention from entry into the United States.

In retaliation for the Magnitsky Act’s targeting of Russian officials, on December 28 President Putin signed the Dima Yakovlev law, in honor of Dmitry Yakovlev, a Russian orphan who died in Virginia in 2008 at the age of 20 months after his American adoptive father left him for several hours in a closed car on a hot day. The law prohibits the entry onto Russian territory of US citizens implicated in human rights

abuses, as well as US citizens implicated in crimes against Russian citizens outside of Russia. In recent weeks, Russian authorities have added dozens of US citizens to the official blacklist created by the Dima Yakovlev law, which is administered by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The law also provides for the seizure of assets held in Russia by persons on that list. It further allows the Ministry of Justice to suspend the operations on Russian territory of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in political activity that receive monetary support from US citizens or US organizations, or that otherwise threaten the interests of the Russian Federation.

The adoption of the Dima Yakovlev law was preceded by the enactment last fall of a package of legal rules that restrict the activities of nongovernmental organizations in Russia. A decree of the Ministry of Justice requires all NGOs that function as “foreign agents” to register in a special registry that the Ministry of Justice administers itself. Accompanying laws specify that NGOs involved in political activities that receive financing from abroad are to be considered “foreign agents.” They impose administrative fines and criminal penalties on such organizations that fail to register. One of those laws also expands the definition of treason to include illegal reception of state secrets and illegal disclosure of state secrets to international NGOs.

The curtailment of foreign-controlled NGOs in Russia is widely understood as the official response to the role those NGOs played in providing assistance to liberal oppositionist groups, which began organizing mass protests in Russia following parliamentary elections in December 2011 that were widely believed to be falsified. The liberal opposition has sought, under the banner of defense of democratic rights, to promote a right-wing agenda aimed at further opening up the

country to foreign investment, instituting austerity measures, and building closer ties with Washington.

Friction between NGOs and the Russian government has been building for some time. It reached new heights last October with the official expulsion from Russia of USAID, the United States Agency for International Development. USAID had provided funding for Golos, an election monitoring group that criticized the 2011 elections.

In November, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) evacuated its senior staff from Russia to Lithuania after it was threatened with criminal prosecution by Russian officials. The International Republican Institute (IRI) likewise evacuated its entire staff to Lithuania in December.

It is no secret that these so-called “nongovernmental” organizations are, in fact, funded by the United States government (in the case of the NDI, via the National Endowment for Democracy). Furthermore, many ostensibly independent NGOs operating in Russia receive indirect support from the US government through thousands of circuitous channels. Given the central role that US-backed organizations played in the “color revolutions” of the mid 2000s, which saw the installment of political figures with close ties to Washington in a series of countries in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence, the Kremlin’s fears of US meddling in its internal affairs are by no means groundless.

In addition to the passage of the Sergei Magnitsky and Dima Yakovlev laws, there have been numerous other signs of mounting friction between the two countries. In October, Moscow backed out of the Nunn-Lugar program, under which the US provided assistance in the destruction and safe storage of Russian nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Russian authorities have also canceled an intergovernmental agreement with the United States under which the US provided assistance to Russian law enforcement projects.

The US, for its part, has withdrawn from the joint Civil Society Working Group of the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission.

What lies behind the deteriorating relations are more fundamental geo-political conflicts. The two countries are at loggerheads over Washington’s promotion of Islamist forces in the Middle East and North Africa, its

drive for regime-change in Syria, and its participation in the new imperialist scramble for Africa, all of which threaten Russian political and commercial interests.

At the same time, although the Dima Yakovlev and other “foreign agent” laws were enacted in Russia in an immediate sense to take aim at the United States, they are fundamentally intended to target the democratic rights of the working class. The definition of “foreign agents” in the new laws is broad enough to apply to nearly any contact with foreign citizens or organizations.

The widespread popular discontent that exists within Russia over extraordinary levels of social inequality will only grow as the world economic crisis deepens. As the Russian working class increasingly comes into conflict with the super-rich oligarchy that rules the country, the Kremlin fears the prospect that workers’ struggles will intersect politically and organizationally with those of others around the world on the basis of an internationalist program. The Putin regime, like bourgeois governments around the world, seeks to prevent this by inciting nationalist hysteria against “foreign agents” and building up a legal framework for mass repression.



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