

# U.S. Quits Key Bilateral Working Group

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The United States has quit a key bilateral platform for discussing human rights and democracy with Russian officials because of "new restrictions on civil society," a U.S. official said Friday.

Washington is withdrawing from the Civil Society Working Group of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, the group's co-chair Thomas Melia said in an emailed statement.

He added that the decision was taken "in light of recent steps taken by the Russian government to impose restrictions on civil society."

These restrictions "called into serious question whether maintaining that mechanism was either useful or appropriate," Melia said.

Relations between the two countries have deteriorated significantly in recent months, especially after Moscow enacted a ban on Americans adopting Russian orphans. The ban is part of a law passed by the State Duma in reaction to the U.S. Magnitsky Act, which imposes

sanctions on Russians implicated in human rights violations.

The working group was set up in 2009 as part of the "reset" in bilateral relations proposed by the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama. It was first co-chaired by U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, then the White House's point man on Russia, and Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, then the Kremlin's top domestic policy official.

When McFaul became U.S. ambassador last January and Surkov transferred to the government, the joint chairmanship was taken over by Melia, who is a deputy assistant secretary for state overseeing democracy and human rights, and the Foreign Ministry's human rights commissioner Konstantin Dolgov.

Melia said that Washington's "commitment to engage Russian civil society ... remains unwavering" and that dialogue on human rights and democracy will continue.

"We will continue voicing our concerns both publicly and privately about the new laws that restrict the work of civil society in government-to-government discussions," he said.

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