

U.S. Embassy in Moscow Offers Assurances Amid U.S. Shutdown

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The U.S. Embassy, located on the Garden Ring, will continue to process Russian applications for visas, as well as U.S. applications for passports, because these services are financed by fees.

The U.S. Embassy has offered assurances that a congressional standoff that led to a partial shutdown of the federal government Tuesday would not halt embassy support to U.S. citizens in Russia and the issuance of U.S. visas to Russians.

U.S. Congress, mired in a battle over government spending, failed to approve a spending bill for the new fiscal year by midnight Monday (8 a.m. Tuesday Moscow time), forcing the administration of President Barack Obama to start shutting down government agencies and programs that are seen as nonessential for the first time in nearly two decades.

Obama warned on Monday that a "shutdown will have a very real economic impact on real people, right away," with an estimated 800,000 federal workers furloughed and veterans' centers, national parks, most of the space agency and other government operations

shuttered, The Associated Press reported.

He accused House Republicans of bearing the full blame for the shutdown. The Republicans wanted to link an extension of government funding to the suspension of Obama's signature healthcare reform.

House Speaker John Boehner denied responsibility, saying, "The American people don't want a shutdown" or the healthcare law.

But the U.S. shutdown is not expected to affect U.S. expatriates or ordinary Russians.

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow will continue processing Russian applications for visas, as well as U.S. applications for passports, because these services are financed by fees. The embassy also will continue to provide assistance through its American Citizen Services, which offers emergency help to Americans in cases of arrest, death and crime victimization, as well as non-emergency matters regarding birth, legal assistance, and money transfers.

"The [State] Department and USAID receive funding in the annual State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act," an embassy spokesperson explained by e-mail. "Under this law, appropriated money can remain available for expenditure for varying time periods, depending on the specific appropriation account. Some money is only available for one year, while other appropriations accounts are multi-year, fee-based, or available until expended.

"In addition, because FY 2013 appropriations were not received until late March, certain State Department and USAID accounts have residual funds that will be available after Sept. 30, 2013," the spokesperson said.

Also, the U.S. space agency NASA will keep personnel at Mission Control in Houston and other places to support the International Space Station, where three Russians, two Americans and a European astronaut are deployed. Two of the Russians and an American arrived only late last week, returning the space station its full, six-member live-aboard crew.

But any Russians who reach the U.S. with new visas might find that popular tourist attractions like the Smithsonian museums in Washington, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in New York, and Alcatraz Island near San Francisco are closed. All government-run museums and national parks would be closed under a shutdown, and visitors using overnight campgrounds would get 48 hours to leave, The Associated Press reported.

The last time the government shut down was on Dec. 16, 1995, amid a budgetary battle between Democratic President Bill Clinton and Republicans led by then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The shutdown lasted three weeks.

Some observers worry that the congressional showdown might be a harbinger of worse things to come. The U.S. Treasury facing a default on government debt in mid-October if both houses of Congress fail to strike an agreement to increase the debt ceiling. Such a default could send shockwaves through global markets, including Russia.

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Economic Development Minister Alexei Ulyukayev said Tuesday that the current budget impasse would not have a major impact on the cost of borrowing for Russian banks. “In principle, I don't think it will impact borrowing conditions for our companies,” he told Russia 24 television on the sidelines of a VTB Capital investment conference.

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