

News of Closure of American Center in Moscow Rattles Muscovites

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News of the possible shutting down of an American culture center sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow after 22 years of operation rattled Muscovites on Wednesday.

Ambassador John Tefft was the first to break the news in a statement published on the embassy's website, warning that the Kremlin was eroding ties that the two countries had managed to preserve even during the Cold War.

"The U.S. Embassy in Moscow deeply regrets the Russian government's unilateral decision to close the embassy's American Center at M. Rudomino All-Russia State Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow," Tefft said.

"These latest unilateral steps further call into question the Russian government's

commitment to maintaining people-to-people ties between the Russian and American people, which continued even during the Cold War and other complicated moments in our countries' long history," the ambassador added.

Both experts and ordinary Muscovites who had used the center's services expressed unanimous concern about the move, which many suggested was political.

The administration of the Library of Foreign Literature says that the center will continue to work, and insists that voiding the agreement with the embassy is just a technicality and that a new contract will be agreed. But embassy officials claim that reshaping the way the center functions is aimed at squeezing the Americans out.

Giving Notice

The American Center in Moscow is the largest and oldest institution devoted to U.S. culture in Russia, according to its website. It was financed by U.S. Embassy funds and had a U.S. national as its director.

The center received a notice from the foreign-language library saying the library's agreement with the U.S. Embassy had been terminated and that the center's director would be replaced, as the library was taking "full control of all of the center's activities," Tefft's statement read.

The library portrayed the move as targeting the U.S. Embassy's financing of the center, rather than its activities.

Library director Vadim Duda said in his own statement Wednesday that the library administration wanted the American Center to continue its work, all its employees to keep their jobs, the center to retain the offices and facilities it had been leasing, and to preserve all of its programs.

"But we must put our cooperation in compliance with the demands of Russian law," Duda said. "A state-run federal library cannot maintain the current agreement on the financing of the American Center, which, in effect, is the lease of facilities."

The library has offered the Americans the chance to work out a "new scheme of contract relations," Duda said, adding that the library was "willing to support [the center's] activity even without financing from the American side."

The center's employees expressed dismay at the decision to shut down the American Center "as you know it."

"We are all heartbroken by the news," the center said in a statement, adding: "Many questions and details are still being resolved."

The programs scheduled for September remain in effect, but the prospects of future operations were in limbo, the center said.

No Americans?

Replacing the American director of the center with a Russian employee and announcing

the library's intention of taking full control of any activities happening in the space that the American Center formerly occupied is an attempt to squeeze the Americans out of the American center, Will Stevens, a spokesman for the embassy, told The Moscow Times.

"[They] are calling this space a new 'North American Division' of the library. While we welcome the library's apparent intention to continue offering access to the former American Center's resources, they are essentially attempting to maintain a so-called American Center without any Americans," he said in written comments Thursday.

Duda, the library director, disagreed and insisted that the center will not only continue to operate, but will preserve its ties with the embassy.

"We're not planning to destroy ties [with the embassy], we're currently in contact with our American colleagues," he told The Moscow Times on Thursday. "I'm sure that when this question becomes one of business and not politics, together with our American colleagues we will immediately find a way out," he said.

The previous agreement with the embassy, according to Duda, violated Russian legislation on leasing facilities, though he did not specify how, saying only that: "The current agreement that outlined the grant [from the U.S. Embassy] had some clauses that violated legislation relevant to the matter," he said.

Duda said that the library's administration would do everything in its power to reach a new formal relationship with the embassy. "For example, [it could be] a grant for carrying out events and programs," he told The Moscow Times.

He neither confirmed nor denied replacing the center's director.

Shadow of Politics

The attempt to reshape the work of the American Center comes at a time of souring relations between Russia and the West over the crises in Ukraine and Syria.

Moscow has curtailed Western programs in the country, forced Russian nongovernmental organizations that receive funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents" and passed a law banning foreign organizations that Russia deems "undesirable."

The U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy was the first organization to get axed under that Russian law, when Moscow proclaimed the group "undesirable" this summer.

The move against the U.S. cultural center also comes a year after Russia shut down the largest student exchange program with the U.S. — the Future Leaders Exchange Program, or FLEX.

"It's very bad and shortsighted to destroy the infrastructure of academic and civil contacts. Those who are making these decisions are obviously motivated by some symbolic views [under which] 'America' today is bad in every context," said Ivan Kurilla, a professor at the European University in St. Petersburg.

"[The library's late director] Yekaterina Geniyeva who passed away deserved great respect: She was able to preserve the situation [regardless of political influences]," he told

The Moscow Times in written comments Thursday. "Today we are seeing just how much can be done by certain people," he said.

Geniyeva, the renowned and respected director of the library from 1993 until 2015, said in an interview published shortly before her death this summer that Culture Ministry officials had asked her to close down the American Center.

She said she had responded that the authorities could do as they pleased, but had demanded a written order stating that the authorities were closing down the center "in connection with tense relations between the two states [U.S. and Russia]," she told the Meduza news portal.

Duda, the current director, insists the decision to terminate the agreement had nothing to do with the Culture Ministry. "This matter didn't surface just now or recently," he told The Moscow Times. "We decided for ourselves it was time to have a new agreement on cooperation [with the embassy]," he said.

Spokespeople for the Culture Ministry also said the initiative had come from the library's management. "The decision was made by the new administration of the library," they told The Moscow Times in written comments Thursday.

"The contract between the library and the embassy (or the U.S. State Department, to be more exact) — its structure, phrasing and conditions — are not in accordance with current Russian legislation that regulates the leasing of space. It should be brought in sync with the civil laws of the Russian Federation," the ministry said.

Much-Loved Space

The American Center received more than 50,000 Russian visitors and held more than 400 cultural and educational events over the past year alone, and hosted scores of prominent American speakers, including astronauts, actors, athletes, academics, politicians and authors, Tefft said in his statement.

Muscovites polled by The Moscow Times said the center was a unique facility providing a lot of useful services completely free of charge.

"I discovered the center in 2001, when I moved to Moscow. I didn't have the money to buy good books, but I did have the desire to continue my studies," Oksana Maksimovich, a frequent visitor to the facility, told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

"The center had a great selection of literature and online access to bigger library resources," as well as friendly staff members always ready to help, she said.

To use the center's services, it was enough to simply register at the library. "It was permitted to take books home from the center," Alexandra Bazhenova-Sorokina, a philologist who also used the center, told The Moscow Times.

"I often recommended events at the center to my students. It was nice to know that in the very center of Moscow a space like that existed, and it felt right to have it in the foreign language library," she said.

"I really like the center; we will try to keep it for our readers," said Duda, the library director.

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