

Russia orders closure of British Council offices

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Amidst a further deterioration of diplomatic relations between Russia and the United Kingdom, the Russian government has ordered the closure of two offices of the British Council.

The British Council is a charitable organisation, nominally independent from the government, which promotes business and academic links with the UK, as well as the English language and cultural exchanges. Until recently, the council had offices across Russia, nine of which were already marked for closure under plans to restructure the body internationally.

As well as its branch in the UK embassy in Moscow, the British Council planned to keep open its offices in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg, where Britain has consulates.

On December 12, a spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry ordered the British Council to shut its offices outside Moscow by the end of January 2008, accusing it of violating diplomatic agreements and Russian tax laws. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that the move was linked to the legal status of the British Council.

“The British Council was opened in Moscow on the basis of the mid-1990 agreement. The British embassy later opened, without notifying the Russian side, Council offices in 15 places all over the country. British Council offices were being illegally set up outside Moscow and, therefore, we were compelled to put an end to this,” said Lavrov.

Russian authorities have been engaged in a three-year investigation of the British Council, and tax police raided its offices in 2004.

Earlier in December, the pro-government youth group Nashi held a protest outside the British embassy, and accused Britain of meddling in Russian politics and supporting opposition groups. President Vladimir Putin

has repeatedly accused Western powers of using non-governmental organisations to influence Russia’s internal affairs.

The order to close down the British Council offices follows months of tit-for-tat moves between the two countries after the assassination in London of Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB officer who was poisoned with radioactive polonium-210 in November 2006. Litvinenko was a critic of Putin and an associate of the billionaire Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, a leading opponent of the Russian president who has been given political asylum by Britain.

In May, the British government demanded that its prime suspect, Andrei Lugovoi, also a former agent, be charged with Litvinenko’s murder and requested his extradition. The Russian government denied the request, stating that extradition of Russian citizens is prohibited by its constitution. The British government took the unusual step in July of ordering the expulsion of four Russian diplomats, a move reciprocated by Moscow.

Lugovoi was elected this month to the Russian Duma (parliament) and is therefore now immune from prosecution.

Lavrov linked the demand for the British Council to close its offices to the UK’s expulsion of the four Russian diplomats in the summer. “The British government undertook some actions which inflicted systemic damage to our relations, so we have to retaliate,” Lavrov said in an interview with the BBC. “This is nothing to do with anti-British sentiments. It’s the law of the genre if you wish,” the foreign minister added.

Russia’s Itar-Tass news agency reported Foreign Ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin saying that the

UK and Russia need to work out a new bilateral agreement on the rules for setting up culture and information centres. Kamynin added that Britain's expulsion of diplomats in July had "thwarted our efforts to draw up such a document. By working 'under the cover' of consular offices in St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg, the British Council is breaching the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations because this organisation is in no way related to diplomatic or consular missions."

A British Council spokeswoman told the press, "We have complied with all applicable laws, including tax and labour laws, and have no plans to shut down."

A spokesman for Prime Minister Gordon Brown rejected the Russian allegations. "The British Council's activities in Russia are compliant with Russian and international law under the Vienna Convention and the 1994 cultural agreement between Britain and Russia," he said.

"The Council is fully entitled to operate in Russia, both in Moscow and elsewhere. We, the Council and its Russian partner organisations have every intention that its programme will continue," the spokesman said.

Speaking in parliament, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband described Russia's move as "very serious" and "illegal," and stated that the government would back the British Council's plan to keep the offices open. A British Foreign Office spokesman added, "Britain strongly rejects any attempt to link the council to Russia's failure to cooperate with our efforts to bring the murder of Alexander Litvenenko to justice."

Relations between London and Moscow have soured under conditions of growing antagonisms between Russia and the United States. Recent disputes have seen sharp exchanges between Moscow and Washington over the location of US missile defence shield bases in the Czech Republic and Poland, which the Kremlin sees as a direct threat to its military capabilities. Moscow is also concerned by the US drive to impose further sanctions on Iran, and the plans by the Pentagon to launch an attack on the Islamic Republic. Washington's position on Iran impinges on Russia's well-developed economic relations with Iran and geo-strategic concerns in the region.

Of particular concern to Moscow is the involvement of Washington, backed by Britain and the other

European powers, in the future of Kosovo. Currently a province of Russia's ally Serbia, Kosovo is now pushing towards independence under the aegis of the US and the European Union (EU), a move opposed by the Kremlin.

On Friday, December 14, EU leaders met in Brussels to offer their endorsement to Kosovo's breakaway from Serbia. They agreed to send a 1,800-man "security force" to Kosovo, while offering Serbia "fast-track" access to EU membership if it accepts the loss of the province—a move that would also take Serbia further out of Moscow's sphere of influence.

The Russian government, deeply concerned about separatist movements at home as well as its alliance with Belgrade, has warned against a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo, saying it would "create a chain reaction throughout the Balkans and other areas of the world."

On December 17, a letter of support for the British Council's work in Russia, signed on behalf of cultural institutes in 18 EU countries and the culture ministries of 4 other countries, including France and Poland, was sent to Russia's culture minister Alexander Sokolov. While the EU has made a very muted response to the British Council affair, as well as to the diplomatic spat between Russia and Britain this summer, there can be no doubt that the further deterioration of relations between Moscow and the US has the potential to draw continental Europe deeper into conflicts with Russia.



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