



# Why U.S.-Russian cultural exchanges are so important

BY EDNA ANDREWS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/08/21 02:00 PM EDT  
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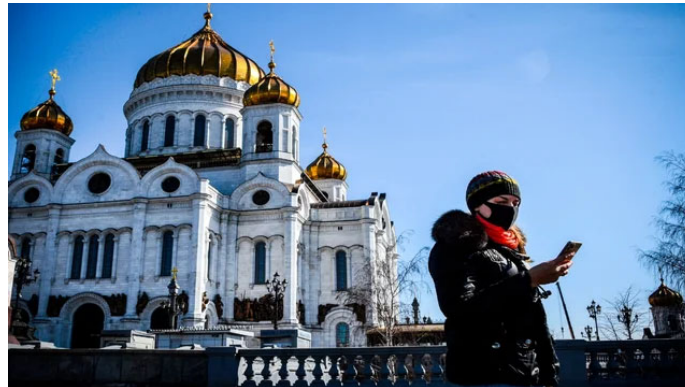
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The recent [decision](#) by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to suspend consular activities other than issuing immigration visas is deeply disappointing and concerning. The restriction will make it more difficult for artists from both countries to work with and compete against each other in cultural exchanges — something that has, even in the bleakest times, kept U.S.-Russia relations in balance.

Before many of us were born, American pianist Van Cliburn [won the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition](#) during a low point in the U.S.-Soviet relations. The Soviet Union had recently launched Sputnik, fear and tensions were high in the West and things looked very bleak. However, Cliburn charmed the judges (including the pianist Sviatoslav Richter and composer Dmitri Kabalevsky) and the audience with his performance of Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, and won the competition. Cliburn was celebrated by both countries and was the first musician to be honored with a [ticker-tape parade](#) in New York City.

Now, more than ever, the United States needs more cultural exchanges not only in the arts, but in our K-12 schools and universities across disciplines and programs. These cultural and academic exchanges provide an important bridge that facilitates collaboration and cooperation that is essential for balance in other communities of practice where we need to work together.

Duke University, where I teach, is one such success story. Duke has been a partner in one of the longest American-Russian cultural exchange programs in the United States. Duke began sending undergraduates to Russia in 1985 every summer for two months of intensive language and culture studies and many semesters. By the early 1990s, the program had expanded to include undergraduate and graduate students from Duke and other Triangle and U.S. universities.

A faculty exchange between Duke and St. Petersburg State University began in 1988, which makes it one of the oldest to exist between an American and Russian university. Until COVID-19 arrived, the exchange never missed a year; Duke has hosted a Russian faculty member each semester until last year. These outstanding faculty teach Duke students both at Duke and through our [summer and semester programs](#) at St.

Petersburg State University, which also is a distinct feature of the program.

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In 2003, Duke hosted an international conference celebrating the 300th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg. It drew important and visible writers and academics from St. Petersburg, from St. Petersburg State University, and spawned a collaboration with St. Petersburg's Mikhailovsky Theatre. Since 2003, Duke has hosted artists from that theatre every year until the beginning of the pandemic. For many years, those visiting artists performed many beautiful classical music and opera concerts, including works by Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, here on campus. We look forward to hearing those voices again one day soon. Similarly, we hope our Russian faculty colleagues return to teach here one day soon as well.

The [closing of the American Consulate in St. Petersburg](#) in 2018 was very troubling, and now the visa restriction will limit the ability of Russians to obtain study and work visas to the U.S. While State Department personnel at the Moscow Embassy [have assured everyone](#) that they will help Russians obtain visas through a third country, and I am confident that they will do so, it nevertheless creates an additional obstacle in continuing our important exchange programs. The take home message is simple. In these difficult times, American-Russian cultural and educational exchange programs are more important than ever.

*Edna Andrews is a professor of Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology and director of Duke University's Center for Slavic, Eurasian and East European Studies.*

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