The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Officials Want Businesses to Save Russian Culture

By Lena Smirnova

May 25, 2011



Corporate philanthropists accused officials of using "corporate responsibility" as an excuse to saddle businesses with government responsibilities at a conference on social responsibility Wednesday.

Government officials and cultural experts gathered to encourage businesses to help promote Russian heritage at the fifth annual National Forum on Corporate Social Responsibility.

The forum welcomed "all those, who are not indifferent to the future of national culture, who make a real contribution to the preservation of our country's spiritual inheritance," Culture Minister Alexander Avdeyev wrote in a formal address to the participants.

Andrei Loginov, government envoy to the State Duma, invited business leaders to make contributions to libraries, museums, galleries and cinemas as part of their corporate social responsibility, or CSR.

But Alexei Kostin, executive director of the Corporate Social Responsibility Russian Centre, said officials were trying to get private enterprise to do a state job.

"Let business take on other problems for which there really isn't money, where the business has know-how. Financing libraries is a government job," he told The Moscow Times.

Kostin estimated that 100, mostly very large, companies in Russia have well-developed CSR programs.

But even major state-owned companies like Russian Railways can find their charitable efforts bogged down in red tape.

Andrew Somers, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, said foreign companies face no more red tape than local ones, but that a lack of tax benefits for charitable donations could deter them from more active charitable programs.

"There's red tape in the United States, too," Somers said in a telephone interview. "Here it's just more sticky."

Somers said the difference between U.S. and Russian companies is that the Americans see CSR as a fundamental part of their business model.

"In the States we went from where corporations felt they had responsibility not just to shareholders, but also to stakeholders," he said. "Conceptually, Russian companies haven't been thinking about 'stakeholders.'"

Gabi Zedlmayer, vice president of Hewlett-Packard's office of social innovation, credits CSR projects with helping the company attract and keep the best employees.

"It's much more the skills and capacity building — and if you do all of that right, you don't only build social impact for the company, you do a lot for the reputation," she said in an interview on the sidelines of the conference.

Hewlett-Packard focuses on using employee skills — such as teaching charities how to manage supply chains — instead of simply sending checks or company products to targeted areas, Zedlmayer said.

Kostin said the Russian government needs to value CSR more so that the companies that work in the country are motivated to replicate such programs.

"Companies in Russia don't go further because we don't have this ideology," he said. "The government does not formulate such projects as priorities."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/25/officials-want-businesses-to-save-russian-culture-a7201