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As Sanctions War Rages On, France Seeks Closer Business Ties With Russia

By Delphine d'Amora

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Despite political tension over Ukraine, French business remains committed to exploring the Russian market, with the French-Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry recently announcing a new project to help French companies start up business in Russia.

Late last week, the chamber celebrated the opening of its first co-working center for French companies. Recent arrivals and those considering opening shop in Russia can now rent space in the center of Moscow under the same roof as the chamber, known in French as CCI France Russie, which also shares a building with its analytics center Observatoire and French-language newspaper Le Courrier de Russie.

Concierge service Klasselit and caterer Fred's Catering have become the center's first two tenants. Thanks to their proximity, they will be able to consult with the chamber on any number of ticklish issues, from minor translation difficulties to the technicalities of registering a business, said Pavel Chinsky, head of CCI France Russie.

The moment may not seem opportune: West-Russia relations have hit their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, driven by Western sanctions over Russia's hand in the Ukraine crisis and Russian counter-sanctions that have banned Western food imports. A raft of anti-foreign legislation from Russia, including a recent law limiting foreign ownership of Russian media, threatens to further destabilize the situation.

But according to Chinsky, the current economic and political difficulties have only reinforced the chamber's commitment to developing French-Russian business ties.

And in fact, even as major corporations avoid increasing their Russia exposure and foreign investors to other developing countries for new projects, on a lower level it's often business as usual.

Participation is as high as ever at "The Days of Russia," events that the chamber organizes across France, where French businessmen can come to hear about the realities of launching operations in Russia, Chinsky said.

Throughout this year's conflict between Russia and the West over the crisis in Ukraine, French business has spoken out vehemently for keeping hard-won business relationships firmly on the sidelines of politics.

French CEOs turned out in force at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in May, even as U.S. and European businesspeople — many at the urging of the White House — declined to attend.

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