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McDonald's Flagship Moscow Restaurant Reopens

By Howard Amos

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The McDonald's restaurant, which was the first one to open in Russia and then temporarily closed by the state food safety watchdog this August, was reopened on Wednesday, according to local media.

Russia's first McDonald's restaurant, shuttered over sanitary issues many interpreted as a sign of worsening tensions between Moscow and Washington over the Ukraine crisis, reopened Wednesday after a three-month hiatus.

Staff at the flagship restaurant on downtown Moscow's Pushkin Square applauded as the doors were thrown open shortly after midday.

"The company has always been outside politics," said McDonald's spokeswoman Svetlana Polyakova, referring to the allegations that the closure was politically motivated.

When it first opened in December 1990 while Russia was still part of the Soviet Union, the Pushkin Square McDonald's had a now-famously long line of Muscovites standing outside

for hours for the chance to try the fabled burgers.

There was no repeat of such hysteria this time — McDonald's Golden Arches are now a common sight on Russian streets. Most of the restaurant's cash registers were without customers an hour after the doors were opened.

McDonald's conflict with Russia's sanitary watchdog, Rospotrebnadzor, escalated dramatically in August when four of its restaurants, including the one on Pushkin Square, were closed because of alleged hygiene violations.

The move came just weeks before a third round of U.S. and EU sanctions on Moscow for its support of Ukrainian separatists.

Anti-American rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin has intensified dramatically this year amid deteriorating relations with the West. President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that the U.S. was seeking to make Russia "subordinate" to Washington.

Russia's sanitary authorities have carried out about 250 inspections at McDonald's across the country, Polyakova told reporters. The fast-food chain currently has 461 outlets in Russia.

At least 12 restaurants were closed by Rospotrebnadzor inspections, while Russian prosecutors reportedly also investigated the U.S. fast-food giant's charity, Ronald McDonald House Charities.

"It's all linked with sanctions although the official explanation was a violation of hygiene standards," said Yulia Vasilieva, a lawyer, who was waiting outside the Pushkin Square branch of McDonald's on Wednesday morning to buy a cup of coffee.

To meet Rospotrebnadzor's conditions for reopening, the Pushkin Square restaurant installed a special space for storing burger buns, a refrigerated area for garbage and a new dishwashing machine for washing trays, Polyakova said.

Four McDonald's restaurants — three in the southern city of Volgograd and one in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi –— remain closed because of alleged hygiene violations, Polyakova said. The chain's other flagship branch in Moscow, on Manezh Square near the Kremlin, is no longer under any legal restrictions and will open in January after renovations.

"We have reached agreement [with Rospotrebnadzor] on all points of contention," Polyakova said.

McDonald's has declined to give a figure for the financial losses it has suffered because of the sanitary inspections this year.

Several prominent Western consumer companies have announced that they are pulling out of Russia in recent months as the country's economy hovers on the brink of recession and relations between Moscow and Western capitals show no sign of improving.

Wendy's, the third-biggest U.S. fast-food hamburger chain, said it was leaving Russia in July.

But despite the problems, about a million Russians visit a McDonald's every day, and Russia

remains a key market for Western fast-food chains.

"I eat at McDonald's almost every day," said Nalchik Yepreiman, a 23-year-old sales manager from Volgograd who was tucking into a Big Tasty burger, fries, a Sprite and an ice cream minutes after the registers opened at the Pushkin Square restaurant Wednesday.

McDonald's has opened 45 new restaurants in Russia since January and is planning to launch another 25 before the end of the year, spokeswoman Polyakova said.

Contact the author at h.amos@imedia.ru

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