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Russian Ballet Show in South Korea Canceled Amid Ukraine Tensions

By AFP

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Bolshoi Ballet prima ballerina Svetlana Zakharova. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

A ballet performance in South Korea featuring dancers from Russia's Bolshoi Ballet was canceled abruptly, the organizers confirmed to AFP Tuesday, amid growing tensions between Seoul and Moscow over Ukraine and North Korea.

The Russian Embassy in Seoul expressed its "deep regret" over the cancelation of the show — scheduled to open April 16 — which comes after another planned performance in Seoul featuring Russia's top ballet dancer Svetlana Zakharova was axed in March.

Ukraine said the show had been canceled after a vigorous lobbying campaign by its local embassy.

"Russian 'cultural' propaganda should have no place on international platforms," it added on an official Telegram account.

But the South Korean organizer Choi Jun-seok, who studied at Russia's Bolshoi Ballet Academy, told AFP that while Kyiv's embassy had requested he cancel the show, the final decision was made by the venue, Seoul's Sejong Center for the Performing Arts.

"The Ukraine embassy did ask to meet with me and ask me to cancel the show, as Russia started the war and Ukraine is in pain," he said, adding that his goal was to help young Korean ballet dancers see world-class performances.

The performance had already undergone several changes in the run up to the opening, including a reduction in the number of Russian performers and alterations to its content, Choi said.

The venue had been under pressure from activists to cancel, with a rally staged outside Sunday.

One of the banners they held read: "Purchasing tickets for Russian performances = Purchasing missiles that will kill civilians."

Another read: "Caution! Russian culture sponsors the war!"

The relationship between Seoul and Moscow is at one of its lowest points in years, as Russia last month used its UN veto to effectively end UN monitoring of violations of the raft of sanctions on nuclear-armed North Korea.

The Russian Embassy in Seoul said Monday that it "can't help but notice that South Korea is now showing a certain tendency in its approach to cooperation with Russia in the cultural field as well."

"We will have no choice but to consider this," it added.

Russia in February said increased tension on the Korean peninsula was "primarily due to the brazen policy" of Seoul and Washington not North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's nuclear weapons, prompting South Korea to summon Russia's ambassador to protest.

Seoul has claimed that the North has sent 7,000 containers of arms to Russia to help support its war in Ukraine — which would violate rafts of UN sanctions on both Moscow and Pyongyang.

Ukraine also protested when Zakharova's Seoul performance was announced, local media said at the time.

Zakharova, a Ukrainian-born Russian, is widely known as a supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the venue — the Seoul Arts Center — at the time cited "safety concerns" for the cancelation.

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