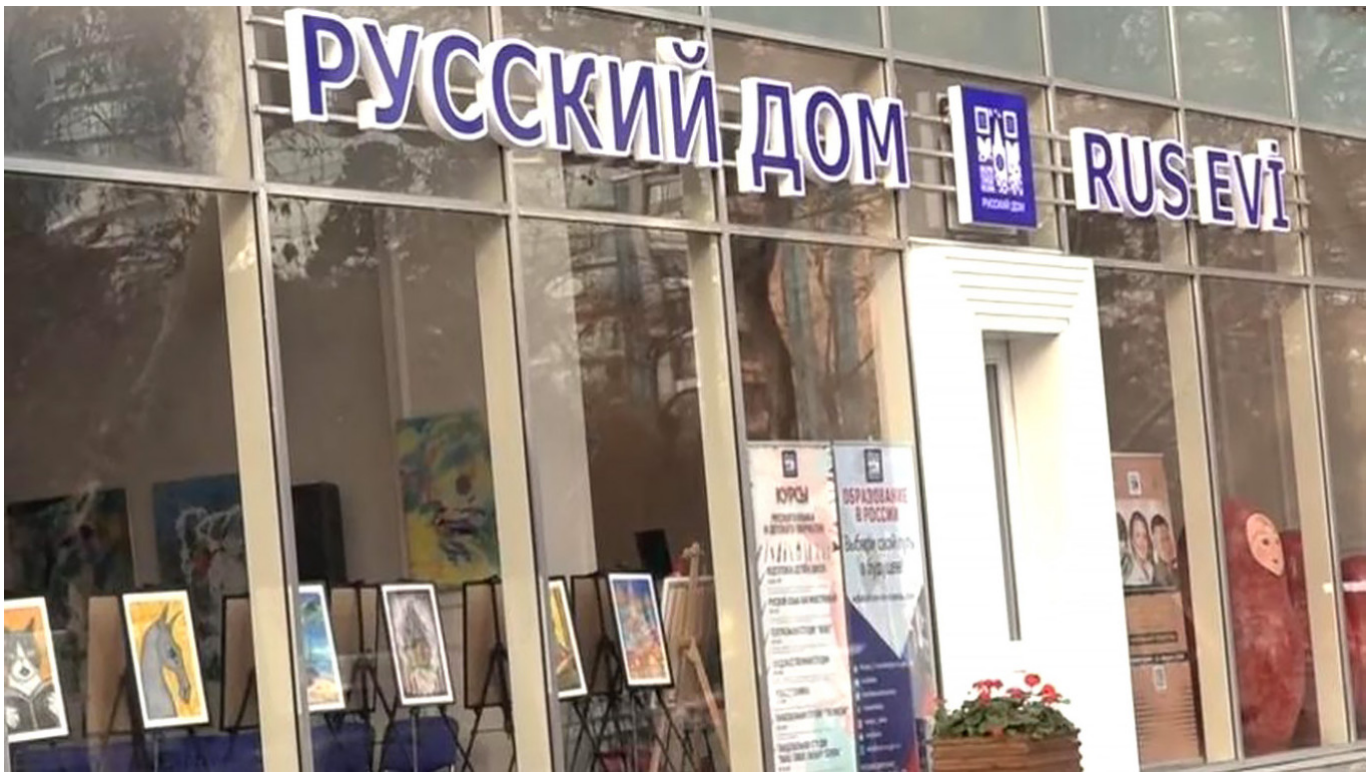
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Azerbaijan Orders Closure of Russian Cultural Diplomacy Agency in Baku

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Russian House in Baku, Azerbaijan. **report.az**

Azerbaijani authorities ordered the closure of the local branch of Rossotrudnichestvo, a Russian state-funded cultural diplomacy agency, Azerbaijani media reported Thursday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

"Azerbaijan itself has become a donor country and does not need assistance from abroad, especially when it is provided through opaque schemes and organizations clearly involved in intelligence gathering," the Azerbaijani news agency Report quoted one source as saying.

Baku also ordered the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on Thursday due to "the lack of legal basis" for its operations in the country, Turkish media reported, citing Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Ayhan Hajizade.

Rossotrudnichestvo head Yevgeny Primakov later confirmed that Azerbaijani authorities had requested the closure of the agency's "Russian House" cultural center in Baku "due to the lack of legal registration."

“The comparison between us, the ‘Russian House’ in Baku, and USAID doesn’t hold water,” Primakov said. “We were never involved in… any political matters.”

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In January, Azerbaijan’s BakuTV aired a segment claiming that the Baku-based “Russian House” harbored Russian intelligence agents.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry dismissed the allegations as a “groundless” disinformation campaign in an emergency meeting with Azerbaijan’s ambassador to Russia, while Primakov said Rossotrudnichestvo would file a defamation lawsuit against BakuTV.

Relations between Moscow and Baku have become strained since the crash of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 on Dec. 25. Investigators said this week that the plane, scheduled to fly from Baku to Grozny in southern Russia, was likely damaged by “external objects” before it hit the ground in Western Kazakhstan.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly said Russian air defense systems accidentally fired at the plane from the ground. Moscow, meanwhile, has denied responsibility for the crash.

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