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Trump's White House Ballroom Commissioner to Attend Putin's Speech at St. Petersburg Economic Forum

By Mack Tubridy

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Rodney Mims Cook Jr. **Andrew Harnik / AFP**

The head of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts will travel to Russia next month, becoming the first American official to attend the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in nearly ten years, Russian state media reported Friday.

U.S. President Donald Trump appointed Rodney Mims Cook Jr. as chairman of the federal arts and architecture advisory body in January. As chairman, he has been the key official overseeing the approval of Trump's controversial White House ballroom extension.

Cook told the news agency RIA Novosti that both SPIEF's organizing committee and the U.S. State Department have cleared his participation at the Russian economic forum, which is scheduled to take place from June 3 to June 6.

“I’m invited to the plenary session and President Putin’s address. And I will be in attendance,” Cook, an architectural designer and developer, was quoted as saying. He added that he also plans to meet with Russian Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova.

The U.S. Commission of Fine Arts later told The Moscow Times it was aware Cook had “been working on arrangements to attend” SPIEF, but it did not have information to confirm the reported upcoming trip. Cook’s chief of staff did not respond to a request for comment.

The last American official to attend the forum in St. Petersburg was former U.S. Ambassador John Tefft in 2017, during Trump’s first term in office.

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Hundreds of American corporate executives and business leaders attended SPIEF until Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered a Western boycott.

The Kremlin claims that American and European companies remain interested in SPIEF, but many prefer to keep their involvement private.

Cook’s connection to Russia includes previous cultural exchanges, such as a 2017 speech at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and various lectures across the country.

According to RIA Novosti, Cook is a Russia specialist at the New York City-based private non-profit World Monuments Fund, and has been involved in the restoration of a replica of The Church of the Holy Sepulchre located outside Moscow. The World Monuments Fund website states only that Cook is a board member.

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