

U.S. ‘sister cities’ agonize over cutting their years-long Russian ties

By Jane Gottlieb

April 10, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Roanoke held off for a year, resisting calls to cut ties with its sister city in Russia because of that country’s devastating invasion of Ukraine. But in late February, days before the war’s first anniversary, officials felt they had to act.

Down came the tricolor Russian flag flying downtown alongside the flags of the six other countries where Roanoke has sister cities. And in Century Plaza — a public space decorated by columned monuments to each city — up went a laminated notice on the Russian sculpture announcing a suspension of “all interaction and communication with our counterparts in Pskov at this time.”

“The Russian flag was tearing at the hearts of our friends from Ukraine who have had friends and relatives killed in these horrendous attacks,” explained Bill Bestpitch, who serves as treasurer of Roanoke Valley Sister Cities. “We wanted to show our support — and that’s not a strong enough word for it. But how do we have sympathy with the people of Ukraine without sounding like we are blaming the people in Pskov we’re connected with?”

In scores of communities that have built strong connections to people in post-Soviet Russia, decisions to distance themselves since the war began have often been protracted and wrenching. Banning Russian vodka was one thing. Shelving decades-old relationships was considerably harder.

Elected officials coast to coast heard pleas to close their programs as well as to keep them afloat. Some people argued that Russians needed American friendships more than ever, while others countered that Russian cities had blood on their hands. The San Jose City Council contemplated suspending its sister-city relationship with Yekaterinburg but instead passed a resolution condemning the invasion.

The discussions were especially painful in Albany, N.Y. “We were heartsick, and there were voices in the group who said, ‘If you don’t take a moral stand, what kind of human being are you?’” said Dawn Weinraub, a Russian scholar involved in the 32-year alliance that Albany has nurtured with the western Russian city of Tula. “But if we did, it would burn bridges.”

These sister-city relationships, nonpolitical by design, have withstood crises before. They weathered Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and its 2014 takeover of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, continuing even amid the increasingly harsh crackdowns of President Vladimir Putin’s government.

Yet Putin’s full-scale assault on Ukraine forced far greater soul-searching. Some scholars see the U.S. groups’ dilemma as a reminder that geopolitics simply cannot be avoided at times.

“It’s the combination of aggression abroad and repression at home that has made citizen diplomacy nonviable now,” said Keith Brown, director of the Melikian Center for Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies at Arizona State University.

The partnerships can be restored, added Brown, who is a member of Tempe Sister Cities. “But a great investment will be required to rebuild, like the shattered cities of Ukraine. It’s not the same, but it’s a reminder of how easy it is to destroy things and how much harder and costly it is to build things.”

Since President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the U.S. sister-cities program in 1956 to promote peace, about 2,500 official partnerships have formed between American cities and those overseas. More than 100 have been with Russian cities, with visits and programs independent of the two governments’ actions and ideologies. Beyond grass-roots letter-writing exchanges, there have been sophisticated educational and economic initiatives. In Virginia, Roanoke’s 31-year partnership with Pskov also provided hospitals and orphanages there with medical provisions.

It was all part of a broad movement aimed at opening up the Soviet system. For many American participants, the experience helped pierce the distrust built up over the Cold War.

“Before I went to Russia, I honestly didn’t have any interest. Why would I want to go to a former communist country?” recalled John Lovric, who leads the sister-cities association in Anacortes, Wash. “But I went in 2011 and loved it. You find common ground — whether in music, taking a walk in the park or maybe looking out at the ocean like we do here.”

Sister Cities International asked groups to stay active, in part to keep their Russian counterparts from becoming isolated. A few hoped to help dispel the Kremlin’s propaganda. It soon became clear, though, that communicating could be perilous.

The head of a West Coast program had been in regular contact with his counterpart in Russia — and then all communication abruptly stopped.

“When we got in touch again, she said she had been out of town for a while,” he said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of concerns for the woman’s safety. “It took me a while to learn she had been detained for speaking up against Putin. Speaking to Americans also became dangerous.”

About 60 U.S.-Russia sister cities officially remain, though they are mostly inactive for the time being, according to the umbrella organization. But momentum is growing for U.S.-Ukraine sister-city relationships. Before the war, the organization counted roughly two dozen. It has since heard from about a dozen more American cities that want to form partnerships in Ukraine.

Several of the U.S.-Russia groups have found channels through which to assist Ukrainian refugees in Europe. In Roanoke, where Ukraine’s flag now flies instead of Russia’s, the program sent more than \$5,000 for refugees via its sister-city counterpart in Opole, Poland. The Anacortes program did the same through its Romanian sister city.

In Upstate New York, the founder of the Albany-Tula Alliance mourns what once was.

For years, Charlotte Buchanan said, the program had a highly visible presence in both countries. It supplied food and medical equipment to schools and orphanages in Tula. It helped establish a public health program there and offered countless Russian visitors training in free-market business. So many educational and cultural exchanges took place that the Albany group rented apartments for its visitors.

“I remember a judge who had about 30 or so courts under him. He wanted to come because Russia was going to allow juries to decide on some crimes,” Buchanan recalled recently. “He lived in our house for two weeks, and we took him to courts. He wanted to make sure the citizens recognized their responsibility to jury. It was wonderful, and we became friends.”

Those visits, research collaborations, even essay contests — none are possible while the war drags on, and perhaps for years to come.

“We were on the way to having a stronger, more open world, and now we’ve closed ourselves tighter than I’ve seen for a long time,” Buchanan said.

Still, some supporters are doing their best to maintain ties in very personal ways. Not long ago, about 20 people in Anacortes and its sister city of Lomonosov got together via Zoom. They kept the conversation light in case Russian authorities were listening in. Then they sang folk songs together.

“We wanted them to know we took down the Russian flag, but this is not going to break up our relations,” Lovric said. “This isn’t a war between us and our friends.”