

From Russia, with joy? Christmas tree gift puzzles Parisians

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) This year the giant tree outside Paris's famed Notre Dame Cathedral came courtesy of the Russian government.

The unveiling event late last month was so low-key that at least one French national deputy wasn't even aware of its Russian origin. Tourists snapping photos this week of the 25-meter-high tree, trimmed with giant blue and white lighted bulbs, had no idea who its patron was.

But the gift comes at an odd time, when France has angered Moscow over the indefinite delay of two Mistral warships' delivery, a decision it says it made over Russia's fueling of conflict that continues to rage in Ukraine, and when Europe at large is on guard with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his intentions on the continent.

The gift came about after the rector of Notre Dame, Monseigneur Patrick Jacquin, said he told various foreign embassies last month that the cathedral had no money this year to pay for its annual Christmas tree. The price tag, reported by the local media, topped 80,000 euros (\$98,000). Russia was apparently the first to offer aid.

At the unveiling late last month, Russia's ambassador to France, Alexander Orlov, called it "a message of peace."

"We want to show by this gesture, that despite the efforts to isolate Russia, the friendship between our two countries is so strong and deep that no politics can destroy" it, he said.

The Russian media in Paris, apparently tipped off to the event, covered it widely.

A Paris-based Russian diplomat, Igor Tkatch, was quoted in the local media as describing the tree as "a marvelous symbol of the unity, fraternity, and mutual understanding between Christian peoples."

Russia has not stopped with Christmas trees in France. The Kremlin has also been accused of lending support to the far-right National Front in the form of electoral funds reaching 9 million euros (\$11 million). The financial boost highlights the growing ties between the far-right in Europe and Putin, both of whom extol Christian values and a contempt for modern European society that has legalized gay marriage and is seen as weak and hesitant.

Pierre Lellouche, a deputy from the center-right UMP in France, said that Putin deals in nationalism and religion to maintain his grip on power and influence outside Russia.

"They are now replacing the red star with the cross," he said in an interview outside the National Assembly, though he wasn't aware of Russia's Christmas tree gesture. "The irony of all of this is that in the old days Moscow used to finance the [French] communist party and communist trade union, now they are financing the church."

French public opinion has run the gamut on the rare piece of seasonal news. "Thank you Russia, Merry Christmas," wrote many readers of *Le Figaro*, France's main right-leaning daily, though surely some of the words of gratitude were likely laced with sarcasm. Another warned: "Be cautious when the Russians bring gifts." One outraged reader of the left-leaning *Le Monde* wrote: "The message is clear, we are for sale, and [Russia] is ready to buy."

Largely considered part of a propaganda effort here, many French have simply shrugged it off.

"Of course there is an ulterior motive, it is to give the Russian government an image boost," said Pascal Ducept, who runs photography tours and vacations in Paris for Photographes du Monde. But as he circles the tree to find a shot, he said he cares little if it was given by Russia, or Brazil, or most other nations. "I think for a lot of people it would be really sad to have no tree at all."