State museum or church?

Russia is debating the future of an iconic cathedral.

by Fred Weir in the March 29, 2017 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) The golden-domed St. Isaac's Cathedral—the fourth largest church in the world—dominates the skyline of historic St. Petersburg. It has been a state museum for 80-plus years, is a UNESCO heritage site, and receives 4 million paying visitors per year.

Isaaki, as locals call it, is also at the center of the most passionate political conflict this city has seen in years, after Gov. Georgy Poltavchenko unexpectedly announced recently that the huge cathedral is to be transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church before the year is out.

That triggered a wave of public controversy, with about 8,000 St. Petersburgers coming out one Sunday to hold hands in rings around the enormous cathedral and to engage every weekend in dueling demonstrations with supporters of the handover. An online petition opposing the move has since garnered more than 200,000 signatures, and the heads of major Russian museums such as the Kremlin and the Hermitage have publicly begged the church to calm public unease by withdrawing the request for its return.

The controversy is the highest-profile example to date of the ongoing campaign by the Russian Orthodox Church to regain religious properties seized by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution. Church authorities argue that it is a matter of historical justice, but others see it as a power grab that overlooks public interests.

"The handover of St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg comes in a year that marks the centennial of the Russian Revolution, so it may become a symbol of national reconciliation," Patriarch Kirill said in mid-February in his first public comment on the subject. "In the past, the destruction of churches and mass killings of believers carved out a horrible chapter in the book of our history and indicated a division in

the nation. But now, the peaceful atmosphere surrounding the churches returned to the believers should become a symbol of accord and mutual forgiveness."

The director of St. Isaac's Museum, Nikolai Burov, said he thought the issue had been satisfactorily resolved in 1990, when a deal allowed for regular services to be held in a side chapel of the cavernous cathedral. There are now about two such services daily, usually attended by fewer than 30 people, apart from the much-larger flow of paying tourists. On major holidays, services have higher attendance.

"Until now, this arrangement has worked very well," Burov said. "We have good relations with the local parish. Entry for worshipers and pilgrims is, of course, free. And the museum takes care of all the expenses."

But Vitaly Milonov, a conservative member of the State Duma, sees that setup as demeaning to the church.

"St. Isaac's is a museum with the possibility to hold occasional services," Milonov said. "That cannot suit Christians, who are compelled to witness one of Russia's main cathedrals reduced to a trade center, a big souvenir shop, where priests are part of the show."

Critics include political activists who say the abrupt decision, made without any public consultation, must be opposed as a basic matter of civil rights. They complain that the church, which increasingly uses its influence to promote socially conservative causes such as anti-LGBT legislation or to rail against the modern status of women, is conspiring with political authorities to take over publicly loved symbols like St. Isaac's without obtaining any kind of democratic consent.

Local tour operators fear church management will deter visitors by enforcing dress codes. They are also concerned that photography will be curbed and secular content may be removed from the lectures given by guides. Some 400 museum workers worry about losing their jobs.

Andrei Pivovarov, an activist of the liberal Parnas party, argues that Isaaki is being traded to the church for political favors at the expense of public interests. He suggested looking to the wider area around the church.

"In the Leningrad region there are a huge number of ruined churches and monasteries that cry out for restoration," he said. "The church shows little interest in

taking those projects on. They want famous objects that have already been restored by the state."

An even bigger issue is the church's insistence that entry fees will be abolished, since a house of worship must be open to all. For many years, the 250 ruble admission ($4.30) paid by tourists has funded not only the cathedral's upkeep but also the restoration of several other local churches. Now, while management and daily costs will pass to the church, formal ownership of the vast building and the ongoing restoration expenses will remain a public burden. And there is concern about the church's ability to maintain St. Isaac's magnificent interior as effectively as state museum workers have.

The process of returning properties from state to church usage has been under way for some time, as the Kremlin seeks the political support of religious authorities and the church looks to regain its czarist-era prestige. Several famous sites around St. Petersburg have been handed back in recent years without even a murmur from the public. Around Moscow, about two dozen historic monasteries have been returned as well as the famous Novodevichy Convent. Similar battles between the church and museum workers around the country have ended with the transfer of museums back to religious use.

"This is a mark of respect to our ancestors, who built St. Isaac's to be a house of God," said Natalya Rodomanova, communications director for the St. Petersburg church authority. "You have to remember, in St. Petersburg before the Revolution there were 500 churches and monasteries for a population of just 2 million people. Today there are just 200 churches, for over 5 million people. So how can people say the church already has enough?"

It's more complicated than that, critics say. All the churches in Russia were effectively state property for more than 300 years, since Peter the Great abolished the patriarchy, made the czar head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and transformed the priesthood into a wing of the state bureaucracy.

Ironically, the Bolsheviks restored the church's independence, at least in theory, but persecuted believers and repurposed thousands of church properties as factories, storehouses, and hostels. For a time after 1931, St. Isaac's was used as an anti-religion museum and later as a World War II bunker. After 1945, its interior frescoes, icons, and alcoves and its neoclassical exterior were fully restored, and it became

the tourist attraction that it remains today.

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