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World Bank to Help Preserve 'Silver Ring'

By Howard Amos

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The World Bank has approved a $100 million loan to preserve cultural heritage sites in four northwestern regions that have been dubbed the "Silver Ring," the bank said Wednesday.

"This is another opportunity for the regions to use their cultural heritage and to include it in their economic strategy," said Marina Vasilyeva, a spokeswoman for the World Bank's Moscow office.

The Russian government will contribute an additional $150.5 million to the "Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage" project, run by the Culture Ministry from 2011 to 2017. The program foresees that restored sites will have a snowball effect on tourism and related infrastructure.

A World Bank statement released in Washington late Tuesday said the project was in line with Russia's stated long-term goals of using culture as a strategic source for social and economic development. The project will function in the Pskov, Tver, Novgorod and Leningrad regions, an area that the World Bank's project appraisal report describes as a "gateway to Europe."

The report also says the four regions are part of an ancient transportation route between the north and the south, and make up the "cradle of Russian history." The area contains historical monuments from the 10th to the 19th century.

Yekaterina Shorban, a representative of the State Institute of Art Studies, said there are a "huge quantity of ruined monuments" in this area of Russia, and that if they are not supported, "they will simply disappear."

At particular risk are crumbling tsarist estates and churches in places where there are now few people living. She estimated that in the Tver region alone there were more than 600 such buildings in need of maintenance. They are a "part of our European heritage," Shorban said, and they need more urgent attention than more visible monuments in bigger urban areas.

The list of pilot interventions for the project, however, contains only one site that is outside a major city.

Defending the scope of the project, Nicolas Perrin, the World Bank's project team leader speaking from Washington, said work "would not be limited to the main cities." Not only would a second round of proposed interventions be submitted in two years' time, he said, but museums and other cultural institutions throughout the regions would be able to apply for grants of up to $500,000 for smaller projects.

Perrin added that they were also employing the idea of clustering in the initial stages, concentrating the first phases of the project together, to encourage the development of a tourist infrastructure.

The World Bank's project appraisal also raises the specter of corruption. The document talks of "serious weaknesses at the lower levels of local government."

Perrin said large sums of money would not be transferred directly to regional government but will be distributed through "project implementation units" and monitored regularly. The project, he said, would follow "World Bank procedure" to avoid the risk of misappropriation.

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