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Kremlin Reconsidering Paris Church Plan

By The Moscow Times

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PARIS/MOSCOW — Russia has suspended its bid for a permit to build an Orthodox church with five domes on the Seine riverbank in Paris, the French government said, after the mayor of the world's most visited city labeled the project a showy eyesore.

Ahead of a Paris visit this week by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, France's culture and foreign ministries said in a joint statement that Moscow had agreed to review the plan, which is close to President Vladimir Putin's heart.

"The Russian Federation has decided on a provisional suspension of its request for a construction permit," the statement said. Wary of diplomatic sensitivities, a government official insisted a compromise would be reached.

In Moscow, the Kremlin's property management department said it would study ways to make the planned building "harmoniously fit the surrounding landscape."

The project to build a church and cultural center in central Paris was endorsed in 2010

by then-President Nicolas Sarkozy but at the time the design was only in an embryonic stage.

The final plans, with five golden domes and a wavy glass roof that would share the skyline with the nearby Eiffel Tower, were described by Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoe as "ostentatious" and unsuited to a U.N.-listed World Heritage Site.

Russia bought the land for the church and cultural center in 2007, a 4,000-square-meter plot less than a kilometer from the Eiffel Tower and overlooking the Seine.

Paris already has a Russian Orthodox Church, the St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, but this reports to the Patriarch in Constantinople and lies outside the control of Moscow.

Putin has been pushing to increase the Moscow Patriarchy's influence abroad, especially in areas with large expatriate Russian communities.

He viewed the reunification of the New York-based Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, or ROCOR, and Moscow in 2007 as one of his biggest achievements as a Russian leader.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow came under criticism in Russia after he openly sided with Putin during his recent presidential campaign, calling his rule "a miracle of God."

Public opposition to the church's increasing political engagement culminated in an anti-Putin performance by female punk band Pussy Riot inside the country's main Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. Two band members are now in jail.

With 165 million members, the Russian Orthodox Church is the second largest in Christianity after the 1.3-billion strong Roman Catholic Church. Its profile has risen both at home and abroad since the end of Soviet communism in 1991.

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