

After Crimea, Russians Say They Want Alaska Back

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A Russian Orthodox monastery sits near the coast of Alaska's Spruce Island, which the Church has laid claim to.

A mere four kilometers separate Russia's Big Diomedes Island from Alaska's Little Diomedes Island in the Bering Strait.

This boundary between two feuding powers — known as the "Ice Curtain" during the Cold War — is likely the only place from which former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin could really see Russia.

But after Russia's annexation of Crimea, which the Kremlin said corrected a "historical mistake," some in Russia would like to see the divide with Alaska eliminated by having Russia stake a new claim on the territory, which Tsar Alexander II sold to the U.S. for \$7.2 million in 1867.

Amid growing anti-Americanism in Russia following the imposition of U.S. sanctions, Russian officials and pro-Kremlin journalists and bloggers have fueled talk — generally facetious — of an ambition to retake Alaska.

In an appearance on a BBC talk show last month, Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's permanent representative to the European Union, made perhaps the most direct hint at this goal of any official, suggesting that U.S. Senator John McCain should "watch over Alaska."

Comic takes on Alaska's Russian past have also emerged on Russian social media. Humor websites published a photoshopped picture of penguins from the pro-Kremlin United Russia party holding signs saying, "Crimea is ours," "Alaska is next!" and "Only Putin!" The picture conveniently ignores the fact that there are not actually any penguins in Alaska.

Other ostensive advocates of Alaska's return to Russia seem more serious in their declarations than the fictitious penguins, but they too are often joking.

A petition for the "secession of Alaska from the U.S. and joining Russia" appeared on the "We the People" section of the White House's website on March 21 and had garnered more than 35,000 signatures as of Monday evening. The petition has collected signatures from numerous U.S. states, including California, Florida, Michigan, New York and Texas. To receive White House attention, the appeal must collect 100,000 signatures by April 20.

The petition, which seems to have been written using an automated translation tool, was uploaded by an organization called Government Communication G2C, a pro-Kremlin "communications platform."

"The objective of the petition is not to bring Alaska back to Russia," said Alexander Zhukov, an assistant to the organization's director, in a telephone interview. "We understand that this is not plausible. Our goal is to show the White House that its petition system is a flawed democratic tool that allows anybody to ask for anything."

"We are trying to protect the citizens of the U.S. by drawing attention to a tool that is said to be democratic but could be used by terrorists or other people with evil objectives," Zhukov said.

He also said that the petition's poor grammar was intentional and was meant to show the White House that "any fool" could use its system.

Genuine Regret

But the mock petition conceals a tacit reality: Russia carries a perpetually bruised ego in world affairs and bears genuine regret at having sold a vast, mineral-rich territory to the country that would become its nemesis in the 20th century.

Russia first claimed the land after Peter the Great dispatched Vitus Bering, an explorer and officer in the Russian Navy, to explore the Alaskan coast in 1725. But more than a century later, after the country's defeat in the Crimean War in 1856, Imperial Russia began to lose interest in its remote North American settlements.

Russia offered to sell Alaska to the U.S. in 1859, hoping that U.S. presence in the region would

counterbalance Britain's influence, Russia's main rival in the Pacific at the time.

The American Civil War delayed the deal until March 1867, when U.S. Secretary of State William Seward and Russian diplomat Eduard de Stoeckl negotiated the transfer of Alaska from Russia to the U.S. for \$7.2 million, a price of \$4.19 per square kilometer. After the U.S. Senate's and President Andrew Johnson's approval, Alaska officially became U.S. territory on October 18, 1867. Alaska became the U.S.' 49th state in 1959.

In the U.S., the purchase of Alaska initially was ridiculed and disparagingly referred to as "Seward's Folly" and the territory as "President Johnson's Polar Bear Garden." But doubts about the purchase were soon dispelled when large gold deposits were discovered in the Yukon in 1896, making Alaska a gateway to the Klondike Gold Rush.

In modern-day Alaska, Russia's recent annexation of Crimea is being viewed through the lens of U.S. foreign policy and has not been perceived as a local issue, according to Jane Haigh, assistant professor of history at Kenai Peninsula College of the University of Alaska Anchorage.

"The annexation of Crimea has not been perceived as a potential threat to Alaska — it has not been thought of in those terms," Haigh said in a telephone interview. "Many people here are not actively aware that their state used to be Russian territory. This history is taught, of course, but awareness of the Russian past is rather low and most often localized in areas where there are Russian Orthodox churches or monasteries."

Alaska is home to more than 30 Russian Orthodox churches, six of which are U.S. National Historical Landmarks. These remnants of the state's Russian history may offer Russia, or at least Russia's most popular faith, the best chance of reclaiming portions of Alaskan territory.

Researchers led by Aysen Nikolayev, the mayor of Yakutsk, a far northern city of 270,000, have found archival evidence that suggests Alaska's Spruce Island still belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Nikolayev has petitioned President Vladimir Putin, both chambers of the Russian parliament and the Foreign Ministry for the return of the largely uninhabited Spruce Island to the Russian Orthodox Church.

"I have been working on this since 2008," Nikolayev said in a telephone interview. "We found in the archives that Spruce Island belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church and that its ownership of the land was immune to any sale and territorial transfer. The island was the home of famous Russian holy people such as Saint Herman of Alaska."

Nikolayev insisted that Russia's relinquishment of Alaska was a "mistake," but said that it could not be recanted because both parties had officially agreed to the sale. But, he said, this should not prevent the Russian Orthodox Church from retrieving its lost territory.

"I have not proposed that Spruce Island be returned to the Russian Federation," he said. "I have only proposed that it be returned to the Russian Orthodox Church, which is active in many countries. Very few people live on Spruce Island. And if the Russian Orthodox Church

were to retrieve its land, I highly doubt that anyone would be evicted."

Dan Clarion, the mayor of Ouzinkie, Spruce Island's only town, had never heard that the 46-square-kilometer island in the Kodiak Archipelago supposedly still belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church.

"There is a Russian Orthodox monastery on the other side of the island, but I have never heard claims that the whole island belongs to the Church," said Clarion, who oversees a town of 185 people, in a telephone interview.

Nikolayev's efforts to retrieve the Russian Orthodox Church's land could be hampered by legal and technical obstacles, according to Clarion — including an existing claim by another interested group.

"Personally, I would not be especially bothered if the Russian Orthodox Church made a claim to the land," he said. "I have lived on Spruce Island since I was about 12 and we have always had good relations with the Russian Orthodox Church. But I think that a territorial claim of this kind would cause more problems within the Ouzinkie Native Corporation, which was given land on Spruce Island as part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act."

Alaska's official policy regarding Russian claims on the state remains unclear — the offices of the current Alaska Governor Sean Parnell and former Governor Palin did not respond to requests for comment in time for publication.

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