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In True Festive Spirit, Moscow Gifts Tree to Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral

By The Moscow Times

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While France on Tuesday indefinitely postponed the delivery of the first of two Mistral warships to Russia, Moscow City Hall has stepped in to rescue Paris' star Christmas tree in a "friendly step" that is "unrelated to politics," Russian officials said.

The parish of Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral this year found itself in a pinch to fund the cost of its holiday tree, so Moscow's municipal government decided to help by footing the bill, the TASS news agency reported.

The tree was erected Saturday at a ceremony attended by Russia's Ambassador to France, Alexander Orlov, and the rector of the Notre Dame de Paris, Monsignor Patrick Jacquin, who both helped to switch on the tree's Christmas lights.

Russian Embassy spokesperson Sergei Parinov also had a part to play — reportedly as Santa

Claus, Russian media reported.

"I myself have chosen this tree from my forests," Santa Claus told spectators at the opening.

The Russian Embassy spokesman told France's Le Courier de Russie that the decision to help was taken early November following a conversation between Russia's Ambassador to France, Alexander Orlov, and the Archbishop of Paris Andre Armand Vingt-Trois.

Despite the festive gesture, the Russian side was quick to play down the significance of the move, with Moscow government representative Igor Tkatch telling state-run Russian news agency RIA Novosti: "It's just a friendly step, this is nothing to do with politics."

Relations between France and Russia have become strained in recent months amid EU-led sanctions against Moscow for its policy on Ukraine. French President Francois Hollande on Tuesday indefinitely suspended the delivery of two Mistral-class warships to Russia, with whom France signed a $1.7 billion shipbuilding contract in 2011.

France has been listed in this year's "Country Partner of the Year" at The Moscow Times awards. Find out more about this award and others by clicking here.

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