The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Residents, Orthodox Activists Face Off Over Plans to Build Church in Moscow Park

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June 24, 2015



Local residents have set up camp at the construction site of a planned church in the center of Moscow's Torfyanka Park, arguing that they need a park more than another church.

Opponents of the building project gathered at the site in northeast Moscow to block access for construction vehicles four days ago, and are refusing to budge amid clashes with Orthodox activists who have also congregated there to express support for the project.

“It's illegal to build anything in parks. If they build a church here, it will require infrastructure such as access roads and the park will disappear,” one of the residents involved in the campaign against the construction, Artur Makarov, wrote on his LiveJournal blog Tuesday.

“There is another church not far from here. The northeast administrative district has a total of 63 of them; we actually have fewer doctors' offices in the area than churches,” he

complained.

The order to build a church in Torfyanka Park was signed by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in 2013 as part of the "200 churches" program initiated in 2010 by ex-mayor Yury Luzhkov and Patriarch Kirill.

In 2009, when Luzhkov and the patriarch first discussed the lack of churches in the city, there were 837 churches in Moscow, news agency RBC reported in May.

"The average number in Russia is 11,200 people per parish, so in order for Moscow to live up to this average, we need 591 churches," or at the very least, 200, RBC cited him as saying.

Since then, city authorities have transferred 143 land plots to the Russian Orthodox Church under the program on terms of long unpaid lease, but only 14 churches have been built. There were 945 churches and chapels in Moscow as of last month, RBC reported, citing the church's Moscow Patriarchy.

The "200 churches" program elicited numerous protests and criticism from Muscovites, often over the locations chosen by the authorities for the churches.

One of the highest-profile scandals concerned the construction of the Sergii Radonezhsky church on Khodynskoye Pole in northwest Moscow. The project was approved in 2012, and since then local residents and Orthodox activists have repeatedly got into fights at the construction site.

Both the church planned for Torfyanka and the Sergii Radonezhsky church are planned to be built on or near the sites of previous churches destroyed by the Soviets in the 1920s as part of the Bolshevik campaign against the Orthodox Church.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/24/residents-orthodox-activists-face-off-over-plans-to-build-church-in-moscow-park-a47640