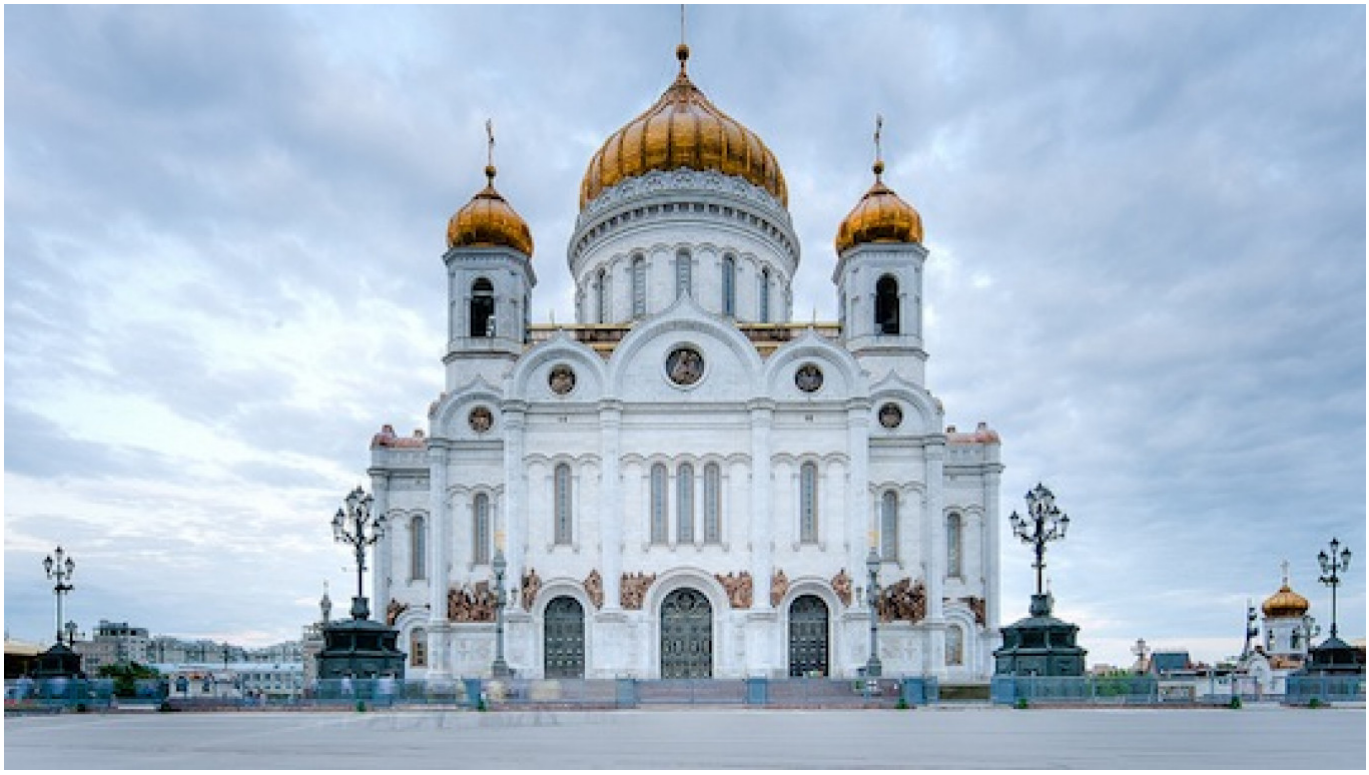
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian State Bank Helps Controversial Church-Building Fund

By The Moscow Times

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Russian state bank VTB-24 said Thursday that the Orthodox faithful can now use its bank machines to donate to a controversial fund that seeks to build 200 new churches in Moscow.

Orthodox Christianity, which was repressed under the Soviet Union, has undergone a revival over the past two decades. The Church and its conservative social values have enjoyed strong support from the government.

VTB is backing a fund, known as "200 Churches," that was launched in 2010 by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church with the mission of moving Moscow closer to the average national church-to-person ratio.

Moscow would need 591 new churches to reach the average of one church per 11,200 Russians. The city currently has around 950 Orthodox churches.

The fund's goal has proven controversial with some locals. Residents of a Moscow suburb last

month faced off against a group of Orthodox supporters over the construction of a church being built under the program in a nearby park.

Residents have said they were not consulted about the construction plans and argued that construction of the church and roads to it would ruin the park.

The Moscow city government has handed out 143 land plots to the Church on favorable leasing terms, newspaper RBC reported in June. The Church fund has so far built 16 churches with a further 38 under construction, according to its website.

VTB-24, the retail banking arm of Russia's second-largest state-owned banking group, VTB, said in a press release that it would offer a donation option to the "200 Churches" fund on its bank machines and online banking services from Thursday.

The bank said its machines also had options to give to other charities including nature conservancy World Wildlife Fund and cancer fund Gift of Life.

Bank of Moscow, which is also controlled by VTB, offers a bank card called "Gift of the Shrine" that donates the interbank commission charged during transactions to the "200 Churches" fund.

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