

Putin Federalizes Crimean Architectural Reserve After Priest Appointed Its Leader

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August 02, 2015



St. Vladimir's Cathedral overlooks the extensive excavations of Chersonesus.

Following the controversial decision of Sevastopol Governor Sergei Menyailo to appoint a clergyman to oversee a revered site of ancient ruins in Crimea, President Vladimir Putin ordered that the reserve should be immediately placed under federal ownership, the Interfax news agency reported.

Chersonesus is an ancient Greek colony that was established on the Crimean Peninsula over two millennia ago. A popular tourist attraction, it remains a protected historical and archaeological site.

Menyailo's decision to appoint Sergei Khalyuta, a Russian Orthodox archpriest, to oversee the reserve was decried by preservationists who argued that a specialist in history or

archaeology could respond more aptly than a man of the cloth to the unique issues of the property.

Alexei Chalyi, chairman of Sevastopol's local legislature, echoed the criticism, suggesting that Menyailo rethink the appointment.

Vladimir Tolstoi, a cultural adviser to Putin, told Interfax on Saturday that the uproar emanating from Khalyuta's appointment contributed to Putin's decision.

"Following the scandal that surrounded the appointment of the archpriest Sergei [Khalyuta], the president firmly demanded that the transfer of 'Khersones Tavrichesky' [the Russian name for Chersonesus] to federal ownership should be fast-tracked," he was cited as saying.

A statement on the Kremlin's website read: "Vladimir Putin has resolved to enter the monuments and territories of the Khersones Tavrichesky National Reserve in the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Sites of the Russian Federation, transfer the National Reserve to federal ownership and place it on the list of Especially Valuable Cultural Heritage Sites of the Russian Federation."

According to Menyailo, the choice of Khalyuta was given the support of the Russian Culture Ministry and was approved by Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill. Spokespeople for the latter denied it, saying that the Patriarch hadn't been consulted in connection with the matter, Interfax reported.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March last year following a change of regime in Kiev, and hundreds of properties on the Black Sea peninsula have since been seized in a messy, and sometimes controversial nationalization process.

Earlier on Saturday, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko delivered a speech at the second Universal Congress of Crimean Tatars, which was held in the Turkish capital Ankara. He promised to "make all the efforts needed to return Ukrainian authority to Crimea," and offered the region a new status of "national and territorial autonomy," the Kommersant newspaper reported Saturday.

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Original url:

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