

Protesters Against Church Construction Gain Rare Victory

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Clashes between local residents and Orthodox activists turned into violent fistfights that ended with arrests.

Long-lasting protests by residents against building a Russian Orthodox church in a park in northeastern Moscow appear to have resulted in a rare victory for public protests after religious officials said late last week they were ready to consider a different location for it.

"The Moscow Eparchy is ready to consider the possibility of building [the church] somewhere else — within the district and walking distance [for most residents]," the eparchy said in an online statement Friday.

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

The program has elicited numerous protests and criticism from Muscovites, often over the locations chosen by the authorities for the churches. The Torfyanka case has become one of the highest-profile scandals over the program.

The Kommersant newspaper claimed it was the first time in the history of the program that the protests had succeeded in influencing the situation.

Clashes between local residents who wanted to keep the park as it was and Orthodox activists who demonstrated their support for the construction by rallying at the site began in late June and often turned into violent fistfights that ended with arrests.

Amid frequent media stories of corruption and hypocrisy in the Orthodox Church, the issue had come to embody the division between those who support the increasing public profile and power of the Church and its support from the authorities, and those who insist that church and state should be separate and who resist the influence of the Church on everyday issues.

An Ongoing Probe

The Moscow Eparchy issued its statement on the same day that protesters withdrew a lawsuit aimed at overturning the results of public hearings in 2012 that approved the church's construction.

"We withdrew it because the [district] Prosecutor's Office is going to pursue its probe into the legitimacy of the hearings," Denis Goncharenko, one of the activists involved in the protests, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Monday.

In 2014, the activist said, the local Prosecutor's Office sided with protesters, declaring that the public hearings in 2012 had been conducted with violations of the law.

"They found more falsifications, so we decided to let them finish their investigation [before pursuing the case]," he said.

Some media speculated that the real reason for withdrawing the suit was a promise authorities had made to the protesters that the investigation would result in "concrete decisions."

But both Church officials and activists opposing the construction admit that it doesn't mean the fate of Torfyanka, a park of several hectares with a large pond in the middle of it, is decided.

Compromise Possible

According to deacon Alexander Volkov, head of the Patriarch's press service, the Orthodox Church is prepared to reconsider its plans — but only if the Moscow authorities come up with an alternative location for the cathedral.

"If the local authorities find a suitable spot to build this church, the Church is ready to relocate construction. We're talking about this particular sequence of events," he told The Moscow Times on Monday.

He stipulated that the church should still be built "within walking distance" and its location should be convenient for residents.

"The Church is making a concession to the residents [protesting against building the church in Torfyanka park] so that there won't be any divisions [of society] over the construction of it, even if these divisions are artificially induced," Volkov said.

The deacon said there was nothing new or sensational about the Orthodox Church's readiness to meet the residents halfway when it comes to the building of new places of worship.

"In recent years construction sites of the ['200 Churches'] program have often been relocated within districts. ... Who should the Church reach out to if not the residents for whom the cathedrals are being built?" he told The Moscow Times.

The only thing that makes the Torfyanka situation unique, according to the deacon, is the publicity it elicited.

Volkov insisted, however, that compromise was impossible with those who oppose building churches in general. "Under no circumstances is the Church ready to find middle ground with those who systematically oppose the [building of] churches," he said.

Victory Uncertain

Goncharenko of the protesters doesn't believe the real victory is around the corner. "The situation in the park became even more tense after [we withdrew] the lawsuit," he told The Moscow Times.

He said that the statement of the Moscow Eparchy gives little hope because of the condition that Moscow authorities come up with an alternative spot: The Moscow authorities don't seem to be open for dialogue, he said.

"It's too early for us to relax. We don't really trust the authorities because we received information that now they're deciding on whether to build both the church and a smaller chapel in the park — two objects instead of one," he said.

A year ago, Goncharenko added, a special commission was put together by local authorities to find a spot for a large cathedral instead of two churches planned to be built in two different parks in the district — including Torfyanka — but to no avail.

"We [the activists] did the research, found several options [for building the churches outside the parks] and prepared all the documents, but never got any answer from them," he said.

According to Goncharenko, up to 30 protesters and up to 30 Orthodox activists currently hang around the construction site in the evenings and the confrontation continues. "[The opposing party] often provokes us, deliberately pushing our activists or insulting them," Goncharenko said.

Andrei Kormukhin, leader of the "Sorok Sorokov" Orthodox movement that defends the construction of the Torfyanka church, told The Moscow Times that protesters' allegations that his movement consists of aggressive young men always ready to start a fight are untrue.

"Our movement has a lot of champions in different kinds of sports among our members, but, as the saying goes, 'a soldier wouldn't insult a child,'" he said.

Supporters Fight On

Withdrawing the suit arguing that the public hearings were illegitimate essentially means that the protesters agree that the hearings were legitimate, Nikolai Pivovarov, a lawyer for the church's supporters, told The Moscow Times on Monday.

According to him, the protesters withdrew the suit because they knew they would lose and didn't want the news of that to undercut their "information war."

"My professional opinion as a lawyer is that it's an outright victory for us. In withdrawing the suit, the plaintiff indirectly admitted that the hearings were legitimate," Pivovarov concluded.

Kormukhin of "Sorok Sorokov" believes that the protests against building churches in Moscow are carefully prepared and always have ulterior motives.

"Some score political points from them, some are financed by foreign foundations to specifically combat Orthodoxy as a fundamental identity and force of the Russian nation, and some, like LGBT activists, are fighting the cathedrals as a concept," he told The Moscow Times.

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