

Plan to Withdraw Police From Russia's Museums Sparks Fears

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An announcement last week that Russian museums would no longer be guaranteed a police presence to protect their collections has sparked concern that cultural institutions will not be able to afford to pay private security firms, and that foreign museums could stop lending their national treasures to Russia over fears for their safety.

Federal police announced the news Wednesday, saying in a statement that it had been necessitated by budget cuts amid the shrinking economy that prompted a 10-percent reduction in police numbers.

The agency had to choose between cutting back on policemen patrolling the streets and officers guarding buildings and facilities, the statement said. Policemen currently guard 135 museums in Moscow alone, *Izvestia* newspaper reported Thursday.

"The security of facilities that have to be guarded by police from stationary posts can be ensured by private and state-owned security firms," the statement said.

But experts expressed doubt over the efficiency and affordability of such companies.

Select private security companies are capable of protecting museums, but their fees are too high for most museums to afford their services, said Sergei Sokolov, a security expert and former head of security for the late Boris Berezovsky, who in the 1990s was one of Russia's richest and most influential oligarchs.

"Most private security guards in Russia are toothless, while the competent ones employed by Gazprom or Rosneft [energy companies] charge a fortune," Sokolov said in a phone interview.

"Even if they carry firearms, they often won't use them, or won't use force at all, because they don't know whether they are allowed to by law," he said.

Ultimate Authority

His doubts echoed comments made by Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg — one of the world's biggest museums — who told Ekho Moskvy radio station this week that police officers are the only people who can "grab someone by the scruff of their neck and throw them out."

"The idea [now] is that private security firms will protect museums. There was a private security firm at the Manezh [exhibition center in Moscow, where Orthodox activists attacked an art exhibit earlier this month]. They have very limited rights. They just stood by and didn't know what to do," Piotrovsky said Wednesday.

In a video of that attack posted on YouTube, a stocky security guard in a black suit makes no attempt to restrain the ultra-conservative attackers. As a result, five artworks were damaged. The incident ended when a police officer arrived at the scene.

Under Russian law, private security guards are allowed to use force to prevent a crime or defend the property they are protecting if a perpetrator is using physical force.

The Hermitage has had its own bitter experience with vandalism. In 1985, a Lithuanian man who was later found to have been suffering from schizophrenia, threw sulphuric acid on one of the museum's priceless treasures — the Rembrandt painting "Danae."

According to Piotrovsky, a policeman who tried to protect the masterpiece sustained lifelong injuries himself.

"Even if you cut down on the police, you can't cut down on the protection of cultural institutions, because they contain our most valuable treasures," said Piotrovsky.

Andrei Nelidov, director of the Kizhi open-air architecture museum in Karelia in northwest Russia, also said police were more efficient as a deterrent.

"A man in official uniform makes people more disciplined," he said.

Nelidov, the former head of the republic of Karelia, has used his administrative experience and clout to retain a police presence at the Kizhi museum.

"We have removed police posts from administrative buildings, but agreed with the local authorities that police will maintain a presence at the museum itself," Nelidov said in a phone interview.

The Russian government will compile a separate list of "facilities of special importance" where policemen will remain on duty, the police statement said.

Foreign Fears

If foreign museums know that police will not be protecting their artworks, they could become reluctant to loan items from their collections to Russian institutions, said Marina Loshak, director of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow.

"For museums it is important to know that there will be people who can use force to protect their treasures," Loshak said in a phone interview.

"One of the consequences will be that the insurance premiums for works sent for temporary exhibits in Russia will go up," she said.

Major museums in the U.K. and U.S. declined to reveal to The Moscow Times whether their security procedures included a police presence.

"Not discussing or disclosing the detail of our security measures is an essential part of those protective measures," Kate Morais, a spokeswoman for the British Museum in London, wrote in e-mailed comments Friday.

In addition to the recent vandalism at the Manezh, thefts from Russian museums are not unknown. In July, three paintings were stolen from the Tarusa gallery in the Kaluga region south of Moscow — one each by the revered 19th-century Russian artists Ivan Aivazovsky and Vasily Polenov, and another by an unidentified French artist. The paintings' value was estimated at 7.5 million rubles (\$110,000), the police said in a statement at the time.

According to the statement, two men wearing masks and sunglasses snuck into the gallery when it was closed to visitors and threatened its director and another employee with an object resembling a gun, before binding them with tape and making off with the paintings.

The paintings have now been recovered and the two men detained, police reported Wednesday.

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