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Park Pits Protesters Against Powerful Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church turns up the heat on Muscovites opposing new church construction in local park.

By Eva Hartog

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On the edge of a park in a sleepy neighborhood in northern Moscow, a Russian Orthodox priest is giving an outdoor sermon to a small congregation huddled together in the November cold. Facing them on the opposite side of a flimsy wire fence, is an altogether angrier gathering of about 100 protesters. "Get out of our park," they chant. "Out!"

The standoff between the group of believers and protesters has become a weekly Sunday fixture at Torfyanka Park. At stake is the proposed construction of an Orthodox church. The protesters say they are just defending their local park from an illegal land grab.The Orthodox Church has branded them "church and cross haters."

More than a year and a half after the protest began, the conflict is no nearer to resolution. In fact, this month the fight seems to be escalating to new heights after protesters' homes were raided by riot police. It was a lesson to grassroots protesters throughout Russia: When you take up an adversary as powerful as the Russian Orthodox Church, you should get ready for a long and difficult fight.

Morning Call

"It was around 6 a.m. when our doorbell rang over and over again, rrring, rrring, rrring!" says pensioner Alexandra Trofimovna, 68, gesturing emotionally. "We kept asking: who is it? There was no answer. Then they forced the door open with an angle grinder, and a group of officers stormed in."

Trofimovna's family was among roughly a dozen Torfyanka protesters who received unannounced visits from masked riot police on Nov. 14. During the raids, phones and computers were confiscated and searched. "They kept asking: where is the money? They think we're being paid by the U.S. State Department or the British intelligence service," she says.

Her daughter played an active role in the Torfyanka protest and law enforcement now consider her "an instigator," Trofimovna says. "But there is no organizer. People come themselves, they want their park."

The protesters have been called as "witnesses" in a criminal case on ⊠charges of "insulting the feelings of religious believers," in which as ⊠of yet no one has been charged. According to media reports, prosecutors ⊠opened the case after receiving complaints from various religious ⊠figures and Orthodox activists, who claim the Torfyanka protesters are ⊠violating their religious rights.

When asked about that ⊠accusation, a middle-aged woman at Torfyanka reacts with a mix of ⊠offense and incredulity, befitting of a country where about 70 percent ⊠of people identify as Russian Orthodox. "We are all believers here!" she⊠ says.

200 Churches

The protest over Torfyanka ⊠stretches back to early summer 2015, when construction of a new Orthodox⊠ Church began on the edge of the park.⊠⊠The future place of worship was part of the "200 churches" program, ⊠launched in 2010 by former mayor Yury Luzhkov and Patriarch Kirill.

The⊠ plan was as simple as it was ambitious: to bring Moscow closer to the ⊠national average of one Orthodox church per 11,000 people. Upon ⊠completion, Luzkhov said, Moscow would be a city where there would "not ⊠be a place without God's church within walking distance."

Many⊠ Muscovites, however, have not welcomed the Church's expansion boom, ⊠especially when it comes at the expense of local parks and squares. In ⊠many cases, residents have been presented with a fait accompli.⊠⊠"They started building in the middle of the night, like thieves," says ⊠Viktoria Mironova, a Torfyanka local. "It came as a complete shock."⊠⊠Over the past years, various local protest movements have sprung up ⊠around the capital — some pushing for new locations, others questioning ⊠the need for more Orthodox churches in a

multi-faith city.

At⊠ least 27 planned churches have been forced to find a new location after ⊠meeting a wall of local resistance, according to the Vedomosti business ⊠daily. ⊠⊠After several months of confrontation at Torfyanka, the Church announced⊠ in August last year that it was willing to move. It had reason to ⊠compromise. Clashes between local residents and ultra-orthodox activists⊠ of the "40x40" movement — a vigilante group whose name refers to the ⊠supposed 1,600 churches that existed in pre-revolution Moscow — had ⊠resulted in various broken bones and much negative publicity.

Under⊠ public pressure, prosecutors had also started a probe into the legality⊠ of the construction plans.⊠⊠After a majority of residents backed relocation in an online vote on the⊠ authorities' Aktivny Grazhdanin platform, the church was offered a ⊠different plot nearby. In April, a new church opened its doors two ⊠kilometers away — but conflict never left Torfyanka.

Information War

At⊠ the center of current tensions is a two-meter-high Orthodox ⊠cross left behind in the park on a plot surrounded by a wire fence. ⊠Here, a small congregation of activists continues to hold a weekly ⊠service. In the eyes of the residents, it is a deliberate provocation and presents a continuous threat that construction will resume once the protesters let down their guard. ⊠"Why can't they just leave the park?" asks Mironova, adding that she, an⊠ Orthodox believer, was refused admission to the service for being a ⊠"church hater."

Such demonizing language has become more widespread, especially from state media, protesters complain. A camera crew belonging to the Kremlin-sympathetic NTV ⊠television station filmed the early morning raids by law enforcement — ⊠much to the residents' surprise and annoyance — and aired the segment ⊠under the heading: "Raids on neo-pagans." ⊠⊠The pro-Kremlin Life.ru tabloid has also recently run stories branding ⊠the protesters as "extremists."

Some residents blame the wave of negative coverage on Patriarch Kirill, ⊠whose public statement last month put an end to their hopes of peaceful ⊠reconciliation.⊠⊠"Today, the cross is being fought with the same fury as the construction⊠ of the church. Maybe it wasn't about the defense of the park from the ⊠start, but a battle against the cross, a symbol of Christianity?" he ⊠said at a religious forum. "We can't take our cue from people who have ⊠an ideological hatred of the Lord's cross."

He also dismissed⊠ the Torfyanka movement as consisting of "representatives of sects and ⊠pagan communities" and opposition politicians.⊠⊠As the Torfyanka protest has grown, it has inevitably become a rallying point for ⊠those who oppose the growing influence of the Orthodox Church on ⊠society, such as the introduction of a 2013 law criminalizing "offending⊠ the feelings of believers."

"The authorities could solve ⊠this problem in ten minutes if they wanted to," the leader of the Moscow⊠ branch of the opposition Yabloko party, Sergei Mitrokhin, said at the ⊠Sunday protest. "But in today's Russia, the Patriarch calls the shots ⊠and authorities fear him."

Though many of the protesters ⊠welcome any support they can get, they are keen to emphasize the initial⊠ apolitical nature of the conflict. "This started as a peaceful, ⊠civilian protest, it's a conflict over urban planning," says Mironova. ⊠"Many of us are believers, too, but we're being branded traitors!"

Analyst Yekaterina Schulmann says the religious rhetoric acts as a ⊠smokescreen for the vested financial interests of developers' plans to ⊠exploit valuable Moscow land.⊠⊠"This is not so much about the church as about the Moscow developers ⊠industry," she says. "The church is in it, too, of course, but mostly ⊠for PR-support: Haters of the Cross sounds better than enemies of ⊠developers."

No End

Without mediation, however, ⊠the conflict at Torfyanka looks set to escalate. At the most recent ⊠Sunday service, a busload of police officers was forced to intervene as ⊠angry protesters tried to stop a priest from driving away from the ⊠scene.

"It only needs a spark to set off this barrel of gunpowder," a Torfyanka⊠ activist warned earlier this month at an urban forum in the capital. ⊠"The two sides are prepared to kill each other."

Such local ⊠anger is unlikely to faze the religious activists, however. They see the protest ⊠as an attack on religion itself and categorically deny there are ⊠believers and local residents among the protesters.

"No ⊠believer would ever resist a church or a cross," says 40x40 member Yury ⊠Shubin.⊠⊠"In the past, Russian Orthodox believers have been thrown to the lions, ⊠Christians have been burned alive and yet we did not deny our faith," he⊠ adds.⊠⊠"If the Patriarch wants a cross at Torfyanka, we will defend it to the ⊠end. Even if they start tearing us to pieces."⊠

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