

Demonstrators Clash Over Fate of Iconic Russian Cathedral

The decision to gift iconic St. Isaac's Cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church has split St. Petersburg residents

By [Ola Cichowlas](#)

February 13, 2017



Sergei Konkov / TASS

Opponents of a controversial decision to gift St. Petersburg's most iconic building to the Russian Orthodox Church clashed with supporters on Sunday.

The conflict over St. Isaac's Cathedral, currently a state museum that also permits religious ceremonies, has divided Russia's second city. The saga began Jan. 10, when governor Georgy Poltavchenko, known for his pro-religious outlook, announced the building would be gifted to the Church.

Opponents of the move say that access to the building will be restricted if it falls under the

control of the church. Russia's conservationists and museum community have also criticized the decision, saying the Orthodox Church will be unable to properly maintain the building.

But Orthodox activists say the Cathedral is a holy place that should be under the jurisdiction of the Church. They claim that religious buildings snatched from the Church after the Bolshevik Revolution should be returned to the Patriarchy.

In fact, St. Isaac's was never fully under the authority of the Church. Under the Tsars, the Church Synod repeatedly asked for the building to be handed over to them from the authority of the Interior Ministry – but the government repeatedly refused.

The conflict escalated last week, when the rectors of St. Petersburg's universities signed a letter urging authorities to fast-forward the transfer of the church. In a letter to the governor, they wrote that the building should be given to the Church before the Russian Orthodox Easter which falls on April 16 this year. But later, two of the rectors whose names appeared on the letter said they had never seen or signed such an appeal.

Petersburgers have been staging protests outside St. Isaac's every weekend since the governor's announcement, demanding a referendum on the fate of the building. An online petition against the move has been signed 210,000 times.

But the largest gathering took place on Sunday, when hundreds formed a ring around the Cathedral.

Embed:

Двойной кордон петербуржцев вокруг Исаакиевского собора. Очень сильная акция в защиту музея. Фото И.Смирнов pic.twitter.com/R4XAm1bAQ

— Александр Шуршев (@Shurshev) [February 12, 2017](#)

Demonstrators held posters saying “A Museum For All” while holding hands around the building.

Embed:

Синее кольцо вокруг Исаакиевского собора. Точно больше тысячи человек. Настоящие петербуржцы pic.twitter.com/BPvy0p05UI

— Арсений Веснин (@ars_ves) [February 12, 2017](#)

One woman held a banner that read: “St. Isaac's is the pride of the country and the world, it asks for protection from [Patriarch] Kirill's business.”

Embed:



A photo posted by Ника (@nika11rus) on Feb 12, 2017 at 11:35am PST

Approximately one thousand demonstrators took part in the protest.

Embed:

Ну тысяча есть точно, даже больше может. pic.twitter.com/UB9WRRcFBn

— Арсений Веснин (@ars_ves) [February 12, 2017](#)

Not far from the protest, supporters staged a counter-protest. One woman held a banner reading: "People despise the American lapdogs! Stop Maidan!"

Embed:

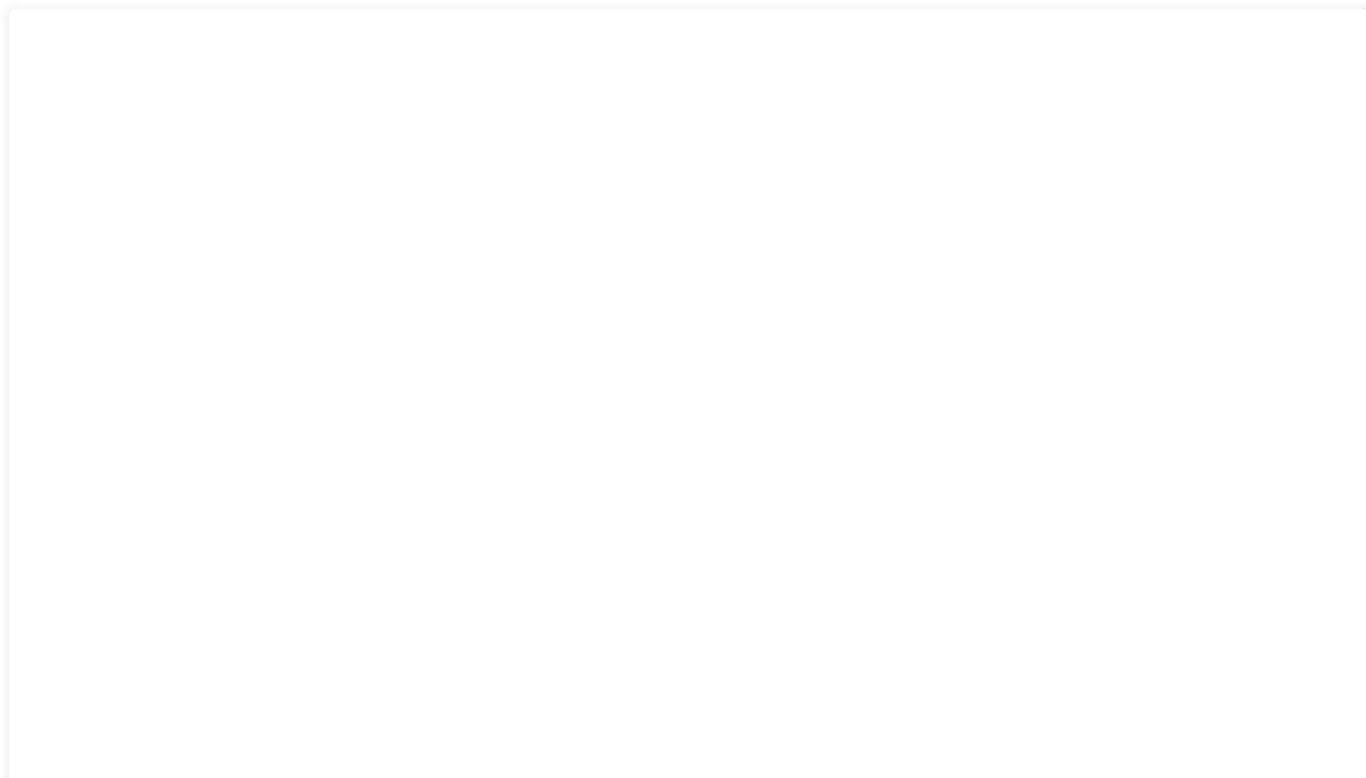
А вот и "патриоты" pic.twitter.com/4CDBcxCJko

— Арсений Веснин (@ars_ves) [February 12, 2017](#)

Orthodox activists also staged a religious procession around the building in support of the decision. They were led by St. Petersburg's ultra-conservative deputy Vitaly Milonov. Milonov acquired international fame in 2009 for being a driving force behind Russia's anti-gay propaganda law.

Dressed in golden robes and holding religious icons, they marched around the Cathedral to show their support for the deal between the authorities and the head of the Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill.

Embed:





Крестный Ход у Исаакиевского Собора!

A photo posted by Alexandr Mokhnatkin (@smalien1978) on Feb 11, 2017 at 11:50pm PST

The procession eventually entered St. Isaac's and declared it to be the property of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Embed:



В день памяти Вселенских учителей и святителей: Василия Великого, Григория Богослова и Иоанна Златоустого богомольцы со всех концов Санкт-Петербурга совершили крестный ход вокруг Исаакиевского собора. #cathedral #orthodox #isaacscathedral #крестныйход

A photo posted by Исаакиевский собор (@isaacscathedral) on Feb 12, 2017 at 2:53pm PST

Milonov then said that the ancestors of protest organizer Boris Vishnevskiy, a Jewish opposition deputy, “boiled Christians alive.”

Last month, the conflict around St. Isaac's resulted in a physical fight between deputies in the city's local council.

Embed:

The Kremlin has said that the decision lies in the hands of St. Petersburg authorities. But the city's protesters say the decision comes from Moscow, and most likely by Putin himself.

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<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/13/petersburgers-clash-over-fate-of-st-isaacs-cathedral-a57128>