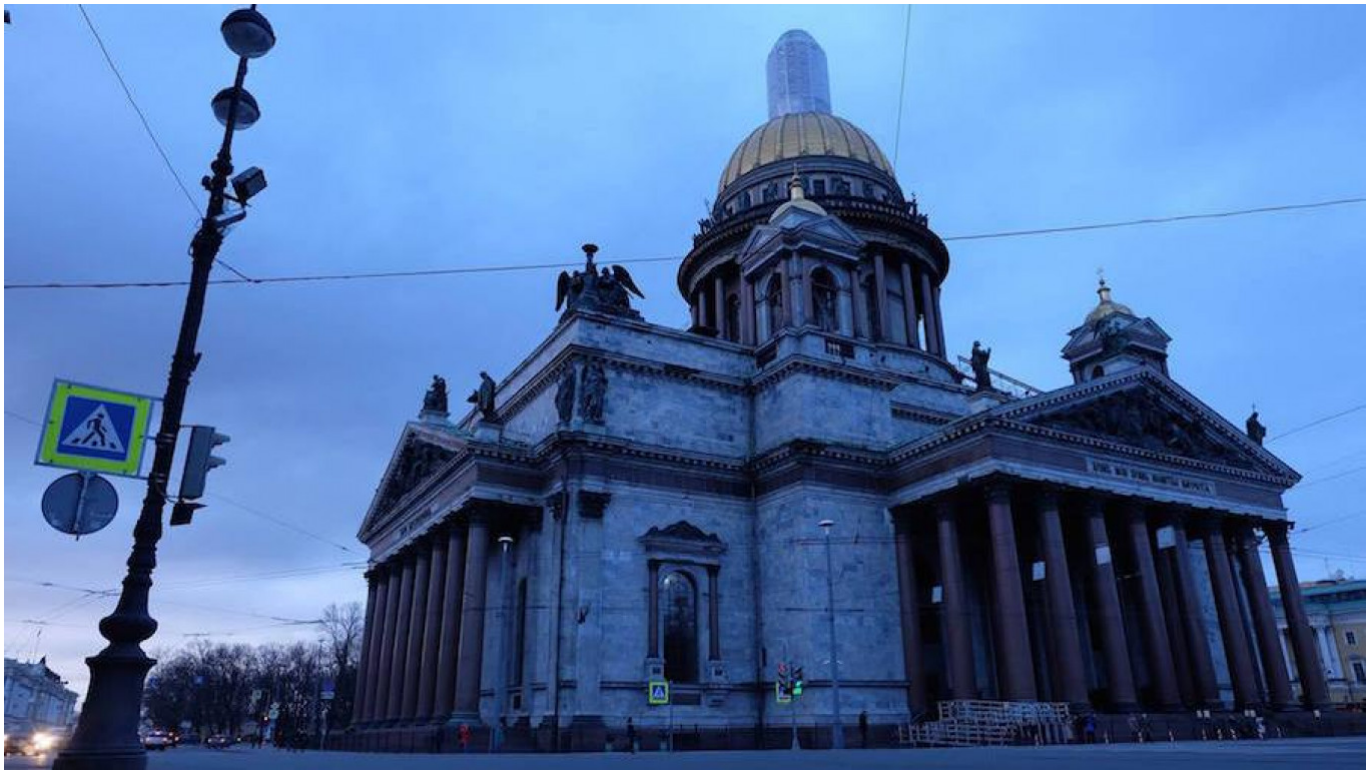
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St. Petersburg Proposes Referendum Over St. Isaac's Cathedral

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St. Isaac's Cathedral **MT**

After months of conflict over one of Russia's most iconic cathedrals, the city of St. Petersburg may now put the issue to a public vote.

St. Petersburg's City Election Commission has proposed a referendum on the fate of St. Isaac's Cathedral, the Meduza news site reported. The state museum and popular tourism site has become a political football in a battle between religious and secular Russians.

In January, St. Petersburg Governor Georgy Poltavchenko sparked an intense controversy when he unilaterally decided to give the Russian Orthodox Church a 49-year-lease on St. Isaac's free of charge. The decision satisfied many Orthodox believers, but angered secular Russians.

Since Poltavchenko's announcement, protesters and counter-protesters have staged demonstrations outside the cathedral every weekend. The conflict even added momentum to

the anti-corruption protests in cities around Russia on Sunday.

Related article: Demonstrators Clash Over Fate of Iconic Russian Cathedral

In the 1930s, Soviet authorities transformed the imperial cathedral into a museum of atheism. The Russian Orthodox Church wants to re-consecrate it as an active church.

The Church promises to welcome all, including the cathedral's 3.5 million annual visitors, but some opponents worry it may restrict entry to Orthodox believers. Others question how the Church will fund repairs if it eliminates museum fees.

“The [Communists'] destruction of churches and massacre of believers has become a terrible chapter of national disunity,” Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, said last month. "The return of these churches can become a symbol of harmony and mutual forgiveness.”

The City Legislative Assembly must now decide whether to approve the referendum. St. Petersburg has not held a referendum since 1991.

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