The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ukraine's Odesa Wins UNESCO Status Despite Russia Opposition

By Cécile Feuillatre for AFP and Alice Hackman for AFP

January 26, 2023



Historic Odesa's city center, with anti-tank and other defensive measures now in place amidst the Russian invasion. **IMF/Brendan Hoffman/UN**

UNESCO added the historic center of Ukraine's port city Odesa, often described as "the pearl of the Black Sea," to its World Heritage List on Wednesday, overcoming opposition from Russia.

The 21 member states of the agency's world heritage committee approved inscribing designated areas of the city with six votes in favor, one against and 14 abstentions.

Russia, which invaded Ukraine in February last year, repeatedly tried to delay the vote to recognize the site's "outstanding universal value" and "the duty of all humanity to protect it."

"While the war continues, this inscription embodies our collective determination to ensure

that this city, which has always surmounted global upheavals, is preserved from further destruction," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay after the decision.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who requested the listing in October to shield the city from Russian bombardment, welcomed the decision.

"Today Odesa got UNESCO protection," he tweeted.

"I'm grateful to partners who help protect our pearl from the Russian invaders' attacks."

Since the Russian invasion, Ukrainians have rushed to try to protect the city's monuments and buildings with sandbags and barricades.

Odesa — located about 500 kilometers (310 miles) from capital Kyiv, which sees frequent air strikes from Russian forces — was also added to the List of World Heritage in Danger.

That designation "gives it access to reinforced technical and financial international assistance" to protect or, if necessary, rehabilitate it, UNESCO said.

The agency added it had already helped with repairs on the Odesa Museum of Fine Arts and the Odesa Museum of Modern Art after damage since the beginning of the war.

France praised UNESCO's decision, highlighting in a foreign ministry statement "the exceptional value of this port city, its architecture and its history for Ukraine and for humanity."

"The decision to inscribe Odesa underlines the danger posed to Ukrainian heritage by Russia's war of aggression," the ministry said.

It added that since the invasion, over 230 cultural sites have been damaged or destroyed.

Odesa blossomed after Russian Empress Catherine the Great decreed in the late 18th century that it would be the country's modern maritime gateway.

But the extent of Russian cultural influence on the city is a contentious topic.

Tensions had risen ahead of the UNESCO vote, with Ukraine objecting to what it viewed as a "politicized" description of the port city in a draft decision that described Empress Catherine II as having "founded" the city.

Ukraine's Culture Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko and Odesa mayor Gennadiy Trukhanov contested this in an open letter seen by AFP, saying that the city thrived long before the Russian empress's arrival.

"The continuous development of Odesa as a port city dates back to the 15th century," they said, adding that it was known as Hadzhybei.

But Russian President Vladimir "Putin's propaganda used the myth of the 'founding of Odesa by the empress,' which appeared in the 19th century, as one of the grounds for Russia's territorial claims on Ukrainian cities and the beginning of its armed aggression," they added.

Russia's representative to the world heritage committee on Wednesday repeatedly criticized what she described as a "poor" application dossier from Ukraine, alleging it was mostly drawn from Wikipedia and tourism websites.

The representative also accused Ukraine of "destroying monuments" in the area it sought to protect, and tried unsuccessfully to indefinitely adjourn the vote.

After the decision was adopted, Russia's mission to UNESCO claimed in a statement it had been taken "under pressure from the West" and "disregarding rules of procedure."

It seethed that the world heritage committee had "ceased to be a platform for professional dialogue," and the world heritage status had become a "bargaining chip for settling political scores."

In Moscow, Russia's Foreign Ministry accused a group of Western countries of pushing through what it called a "politically motivated" decision in violation of standard procedures.

"It was prepared hastily, without respecting the current high standards of UNESCO," the foreign ministry said, stressing that just six countries voted in favor.

Moscow pointed to "the glorious historical past of Odesa as part of the Russian state," insisting that the only threat the port city faced was from "the nationalist regime in Ukraine" which has taken down a number of monuments.

In December, Ukrainian authorities in Odesa pulled down a statue of Catherine II as part of its efforts to de-Russify the city, after polling residents on what to do with it.

Six other Ukrainian sites have already been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, including the Saint-Sophia Cathedral in the capital Kyiv and the historic center of the western city of Lviv.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/26/ukraines-odesa-wins-unesco-status-despite-russia-opposition-a80048