
RUSSIA: CAN PRIVATIZATION PRESERVE THE PAST?

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MOSCOW, Jan. 8, 2007 (IPS/GIN) – Russian authorities are considering a proposal to privatize monuments so they could be preserved better as tourist attractions.

"The moratorium on privatization of cultural monuments may be repealed, and we expect this to happen in the upcoming months," Deputy Minister for Culture and the Press Andrey Busygin announced.

More than 200 mansions and about 450 monuments in Moscow and environs have been designated for restoration.

"All property was nationalized following the 1917 revolution. This proved catastrophic for a lot of historic buildings, as they were detached from the way of life and social structures and institutions which had created them," Edmund Harris, executive member of the Moscow Architecture Preservation Society (MAPS), told IPS.

Once the landed gentry was expelled, their manor houses were used as sports bases and farm workers' clubs. "They were treated entirely functionally and only running repairs were done, while others were abandoned altogether and left to rot," Harris said.

Preserving these buildings may be far too expensive for the state. "The task is absolutely enormous," Harris said. "Financing for the restoration of even the most well-known historic buildings is uneven and unpredictable. Privatizing them is, in principle, the only way that money will ever be found to restore them or at least save them from falling to bits completely."

St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko has announced that some of the second-rank historic buildings – those not occupied by museums or on the tourist trail – would be offered to investors on long-term lease to ease the burden on the city administration.

"Whatever is in the hands of public institutions hardly works, and the wretched state of historical statues and monuments reflects the importance attached to them by the authorities," Olga Matrosova, manager at the international department of Delta Realty, a real estate company, told IPS.

The buildings could in theory be protected better and managed more efficiently through privatization, though that may bring its own dangers, she said.

"We should not lose sight of the fact that in the process some of the historical monuments could be mishandled or might totally be lost, or some people will just make shady deals over them. These are practical risks when individuals are privately asked to run such cultural ventures. It's difficult to weigh these things up."

Matrosova condemned the indiscriminate destruction of several historical buildings that

have been replaced by new apartment or office blocks. "Those aspects of our cultural history are simply irreplaceable and irretrievable."

Anya Levitov, managing partner at Evans Property Services in Moscow, says the key to successful upkeep of monuments is to observe the law, which is impossible in a corrupt environment.

Existing legislation intended to protect historic buildings is not being enforced, and several structures have been demolished or altered. The legislation itself is open to interpretation.

Many historical buildings have been rebuilt or destroyed for commercial reasons, Levitov said, and such decisions were made by government officials. Monuments may not be safe in private hands either, she said.

"The government might be trying to save the effort and expense of maintaining the monuments, but privatization is not the only solution. Other viable alternatives could include hiring professional management companies who could maintain the monuments and generate income. And it would help for the government to obey its own laws."

The Cultural Ministry claims it has done what it can by making a budget available to save public monuments.

"The cultural sector as a whole is going through its sternest test, when cultural equipment and monuments are largely getting older, dustier and rustier, and need constant maintenance and preservation," local preservationist Andrey Klimenko told IPS.

"But with the state budget dwindling to barely enough to meet the cost of repairs, a private person will keep them in order and protect them better than the government. The bureaucrat is the greatest enemy of culture and of the people. There is no control over him."

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