
AHEAD OF VISIT, PUTIN GETS CHURCH IN SERBIA NAMED AFTER HIM

-

15.01.2019

ABC News (14 January 2019)

Russian President Vladimir Putin already has a village, a wax figure, a plum brandy and several cafes named after him in Serbia. Now, he's getting a church.

Topped with Russian-style green-and-gold onion-shaped domes, the church in this tiny village in northwestern Serbia is still under construction but it has already been dubbed "Putin's church."

Locals say the emerging structure is meant as a sign of admiration for Putin and the centuries-long brotherly ties between the two nations that share common Slavic roots and the Orthodox Christian religion.

With Putin set to visit Serbia later this week, the residents of Banstol are eagerly awaiting word on whether he might come to see the church, as some local media have suggested.

"This church has acquired the unofficial name of Putin's church because Putin is a symbol of a new, upright Russia, a Russia which Serbs have started to believe in once again," said the local initiator of the project, Branko Simonovic.

Simonovic said the church is purposefully designed in the Russian style □ traditional Serbian churches have different domes and towers □ to show that Serbs "were always looking to Russia for backing, precisely because of religion."

Historically close ties between Russia and Serbia have recently been visibly revived after Putin stepped up efforts to restore Moscow's influence in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Russia's interest in the region relates to its strategic position between East and West. Out of Serbia's eight neighbors, five are NATO members; four are in the EU and two more are working toward accession.

Serbia has turned out to be a faithful ally to Russia even as the country formally seeks membership in the European Union. Belgrade has refused to join Western sanctions against Russia over Ukraine and has promised it will stay out of NATO.

Analysts say that strong ties between the Serbian and Russian churches have played a major role in restoring Russia's influence among the Serbs after the historic alliance collapsed during the existence of Yugoslavia whose communist leader Josip Broz Tito turned away from the Soviet Union to foster close links with the West.

Nowadays, shirts with Putin's image are sold by street vendors and openly pro-Russian ministers sit in the Serbian government. Surveys say that most Serbs believe Russia is their country's biggest ally and financial donor despite much bigger Western economic and other aid to the Balkan country.

Putin's popularity is mostly because the Kremlin is supporting Serbia in its rejection of independence for the former Serbian province of Kosovo, which the Serbian church considers its birthplace and where hundreds of its medieval monasteries and churches are located.

In contrast, most Western countries have recognized Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence.

The Head of the Serbian Orthodox church, Patriarch Irinej, recently said that Serbia wants good relations with Europe, the United States and Russia, but since the interests of the West "counter ours, there is no doubt that Russia comes first."

The Serbian church demonstrated its loyalty when it sided recently with Russia in rejection of independence for the Ukrainian church from Moscow.

Similarly, in the Serb-run part of neighboring Bosnia, pro-Russia authorities are building a Serbia-Russia cultural and religious center that also will include a church that many see as a display of Russia's soft power influence in the Balkans — the ability to attract masses, rather than use force to subdue them like the Soviets did.

A common joke among liberal Serbs is that the preparations for Putin's visit to Serbia on Thursday are as if the Pope is arriving.

The highlight of Putin's one-day trip will be his visit to the biggest Orthodox Christian temple in the Balkans in Belgrade where some of its mosaics were painted by Russian artists with money donated by the Kremlin.

Putin and his host, Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic, are set to address tens of thousands of people outside the Saint Sava church "in a symbol of brotherly ties," the organizers said.

Apart from media attention, the Russia-style church in Banstol has attracted tens of thousands of dollars in donations, from home and abroad, especially since it was named after the Russian president. Undisclosed Russian donors reportedly also contributed.

"I see that Putin's picture is put on women's underpants, gold watches, cell phones, so why wouldn't a church bear his name? I think that he'd be more happy to have this church as his image brand," Simonovic said.

<https://abcnews.go.com/beta-story-container/International/wireStory/ahead-visit-putin-church-serbia-named-60358280>

Kaynak/Source: