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Russian patriarch asks UNESCO for access to Orthodox shrines

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Russian Patriarch Alexei II has asked UNESCO to guarantee the access of Orthodox believers to their shrines in Kosovo.

“After they are restored, the Orthodox holy sites in Kosovo and Metohija should be returned to their legal owners to enable the congregations to use them”, the Patriarch told UNESCO Secretary-General Koichiro Matsuura in Moscow.

There should not be a repeat of the experiences of the Council of Europe, under whose auspices the restoration of several churches in the province of Kosovo is being carried out, Alexei II said, explaining that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is unable to control this process and that the churches are not being returned to their legal owners, but are being declared as "the architectural and cultural heritage of Kosovo."

The Russian patriarch said that in Kosovo, "which represents the sacred land for the Serbs," and which "has a huge role in the history of the Serb nation ... about 150 churches were demolished with the tacit agreement of the international forces, although they represent the world cultural and historic heritage."

Alexei II stated that "the Russian church, in cooperation with the SPC, backs UNESCO's initiative for the restoration of the holy sites in Kosovo and Metohia."

"The Russian leadership has expressed readiness to restore seven orthodox churches and Muslim holy sites by sending architects, engineers and other experts," Alexei II set out.

On May 6, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that, acting upon the instructions of recent president and current prime minister, Vladimir Putin, it was considering Russia's participation in the restoration of orthodox holy sites in Kosovo and Metohija within UNESCO projects, as well as earmarking funds for this purpose.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said that, since 2000, over 150 orthodox churches and monasteries have been demolished in Kosovo and Metohia, some of which were on the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage.



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