

Table of Contents

- ***Italy gives € 500,000 for the restoration of Odessa's Orthodox Cathedral shelled by Russia***

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The church, heavily damaged by Russian shelling on July 23, 2023, is one of the beneficiaries of the projects of the Italian presidency of G7.

by Willy Fautré with Ievgeniia Gidulianova

[Bitter Winter](#) (16.02.2024) – Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni is keeping her promise made as early as August 2023 to contribute financially to the emergency restoration of the Transfiguration Cathedral of Odessa heavily damaged by Russian shelling on 23 July 2023.

In early February 2024, an agreement was signed between Italy and UNESCO on the allocation of funds, according to the [Odessa City Council](#). The Italian government delegation was chaired by Davide La Cecilia, Special Envoy for the Reconstruction and Strengthening of Ukraine's Resilience.

On the night of July 23, 2023, Russian troops carried out a [massive attack on the territory of Odessa and the region](#), firing 19 missiles of various types. The blow fell on the historical center of Odessa, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. As a result of the attack, 25 architectural monuments were damaged, in particular the Transfiguration Cathedral. Half of the cathedral was left without a roof, the central piles and foundation were broken in the building, all windows were knocked out, stucco was knocked down. Rescuers and clergy managed to save some icons, including the Kasperovskaya Icon of the Mother of God, who is considered the patroness of Odessa. The Iberian Icon, installed for the 100th anniversary of Odessa, also survived.

On October 2, 2023, Ukraine and Italy signed an agreement to repair the Transfiguration Cathedral.

In November, heavy rains flooded the cathedral, and urgent conservation work of the roof was started by the Odessa Diocese.

Reconstruction to be based on a tripartite Memorandum and under a Supervisory Board

The mayor's office said that the plans are to sign a tripartite Memorandum of Cooperation on the Reconstruction of Odessa (Italy – Ukraine – UNESCO), as well as separately one between Italy and Ukraine, where the areas of cooperation will be marked.

To perform this restoration work, a Supervisory Board will be created, which will include all parties to the tripartite Memorandum, as well as strategic, technical and scientific committees. The latter, in particular, will include scientists from the Polytechnic Institute of Milan, the Milan Triennial Museum, and the National Museum of Modern Art and Architecture in Rome.

It should be wise for the Ukrainian side to include [Prof. Meshcheriakov](#) in the Supervisory Board as his name is closely connected with the history of the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral, which was completely destroyed during Stalin's time. Ph.D. Arch., Associate Professor, Meshcheriakov is a member of the Ukrainian Committee of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), Chairman of the Odessa regional branch of the Architectural Chamber of the National Union of Architects of Ukraine, forensic expert of the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, Research Fellow on the British Academy's Researchers at Risk Programme, and Visiting Scholar at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. He is the author of two monographs and more than seventy scientific publications, articles, theses in the field of architecture and protection of cultural heritage.

Under Meshcheriakov's leadership, a group of architects in 1999 was the laureate of the national call for projects for the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral, which was rebuilt in 2000–2010 on the basis of his project. He was then awarded the State Prize of Ukraine in the field of architecture for the reconstruction of the Odessa Cathedral. He is also the author of a book on this topic.

The legal status of the Cathedral: complex and unclear

[The legal status of the Transfiguration Cathedral](#) is rather complex and unclear. Until May 2022, it was considered a church with a special status and rights of broad autonomy, affiliated to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/Moscow Patriarchate (UOC/MP).

On 27 May 2022, the Council of the UOC/MP removed all references to such dependence from its statutes, stressing its financial autonomy and the absence of any external interference in the appointment of its clergy. It hereby dissociated itself from the Russian Orthodox Church and stopped commemorating Patriarch Kirill (of the Russian Orthodox Church) at the divine services because of his support to Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine. This distancing did however not lead to a schism from Moscow so that the UOC can keep its canonical status. In the meantime, the process of transfer of UOC parishes to the national Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), founded in December 2018 under President Poroshenko and recognized by Constantinople Patriarchate on 5 January 2019, has accelerated.

In this context, the comment of [Archdeacon Andriy Palchuk, a cleric of the Odessa Eparchy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church \(UOC\)](#) about the damage caused to the cathedral is worth mentioning: "The destruction is colossal. Half of the cathedral is left without a roof. The central pillars and the foundation are broken. All the windows and stucco were blown out. There was a fire, the part where icons and candles are sold in the church caught fire. After the end of the air raid, the emergency services arrived and extinguished everything."

On 23 July 2023, [Archbishop Victor of Artsyz](#) (UOC) appealed to Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church in a virulent way about the shelling of the cathedral. He accused him of supporting the war against Ukraine, a sovereign country, and personally blessing the Russian Armed Forces who are committing atrocities.

Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church kept silent about the heavy damage caused to the Orthodox Cathedral of Odessa by Russian shelling and has not proposed any financial or other assistance to its reconstruction.

Japan's assistance

Japan offered Ukraine financial assistance to restore cultural heritage, education and media through the UNESCO.

The signing ceremony was held on 7 February at the organization's headquarters in Paris. It was attended by Japan's representative to UNESCO Kano Takehiro, UNESCO Director General Audrey Azoulet, and Ambassador of Ukraine to France Vadym Omelchenko.

[Japanese](#) officials say that this year their country will allocate about 14.6 million US dollars to Ukraine, where hostilities are ongoing.

These funds will help preserve the world heritage in the historical center of Odessa, which was affected by Russian missile strikes.

On 24–25 February, a [symposium on Ukrainian culture](#) against the background of war will be held at Keio University in Tokyo and will be accessible online after [registration](#).

Last year, the Consul General of the Hellenic Republic in Odessa, Dimitrios Dohtsis, announced that Greece also intended to assist in the restoration of architectural monuments that were damaged [during the Russian missile attack](#), including the Cathedral, but as of early February nothing was made public about possible concrete initiatives.

No other EU country has promised to contribute to the restoration of the Cathedral.

Soon after the Russian shelling of Odessa, [EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell](#) called the night strike on the city another Russian war crime and tweeted: "Russia's relentless missile terror against UNESCO-protected Odessa is yet another war crime by the Kremlin, which has also destroyed the main Orthodox cathedral, a World Heritage Site. Russia has already damaged hundreds of cultural sites in an attempt to destroy Ukraine." No EU promise was however made to contribute to the reconstruction of the destroyed parts of the Cathedral.
