

## **Baku Cathedral Warms Russian Hearts**

**Author:** [Alyona Myasnikova](#)

A Russian Orthodox church in Baku has opened its doors for the first time in eight decades.

When the official guests had left, the holy place was left to its parishioners and a small choir which sang gentle hymns. One old lady, bent almost double with age, told all around her that she had last worshipped in this place as a child – 83 years ago, before the Red Army marched into Baku and closed the Cathedral of Holy Myrrh-Bearers down.

Its reopening on March 24 not only confers the Azerbaijan's blessing on the Russian Orthodox church, but also further strengthens ties between Baku and Moscow - which were severely strained in the early Nineties and are now steadily improving.

Speaking at the cathedral, Russian ambassador Nikolai Ryabov praised Azerbaijan for its long tradition of religious tolerance, noting the church's original architecture which blends Russian and oriental styles.

Baku has two other Orthodox churches serving its Russian community, but the Cathedral of Holy Myrrh-Bearers has a special place in the city's life, and its striking combination of styles makes it a favourite architectural monument.

It was built in 1909 with donations from many Azerbaijani patrons of the arts, including the oil mogul Haji Zeinal-Abdin Tagiev. But when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1920, they closed down the church and murdered its priest.

In Soviet times it was located inside a military compound and used as an ammunition depot. When the USSR disintegrated in 1991, the dilapidated building was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church. Two years later, Russian patriarch Alexii II visited the site, inspected the repair work being done and officially consecrated it as Baku's diocesan cathedral.

According to the records of the State Committee for Liaison with Religious Organisations, 95 per cent of Azerbaijan's population is Muslim. But the country prides itself on a tradition of religious tolerance and the city also has Catholic churches and three synagogues.

However some Protestant congregations, such as Baptists, complain that the Azerbaijani authorities obstruct their work in the country.

Of all non-Muslim religions, Orthodox Christianity has by far the greatest number of followers in the country. No figures are available, but the Baku diocese told IWPR that there are some 150,000 Russians in Azerbaijan and that Ukrainians, Russians, Greeks and some Azerbaijanis also attend Orthodox services.

Alongside the religious significance of the reopening of the church, few missed the political context. President Heidar Aliiev attended the opening and called it "one more big step in the further development of state relations between Azerbaijan and Russia".

"Many observers believe the president wanted to curry favour with Russia by attending the opening ceremony," said Leila Yunus, director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy. "Now that Azerbaijan has

officially joined the anti-Iraq coalition, this could be an attempt to appease Russia, which is vehemently opposed to the United State-led aggression in Iraq.

“The church was restored with donations raised in Azerbaijan, and the fund-raising effort was led by the president himself. The Russian Orthodox Church didn’t pay a penny,” she said, adding that large donations to arts and charities were rarely made without direct pressure from the government.

The biggest sponsor for the project was Russian-based Azerbaijani businessman Aidyn Kurbanov, and this in itself has triggered controversy.

At the General Assembly of the Union of Russian Compatriots in Baku – a conference of cultural figures and businessmen - held two days before the cathedral reopened, speakers regretted that an Azerbaijani businessman and not Russian capital had funded the restoration of the church.

Not all Orthodox believers in Azerbaijan share this view. “What difference does it make? It was money well spent. We’ve always been friends with Azerbaijani people, and God gives to everyone according to their deeds,” said Lidia Gordeyeva, a parishioner at the cathedral.

One Orthodox priest from the Baku diocese, who declined to give his name, also brushed aside this concern. “Personally, I would like to see some Russian capital involved, but since the Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan lacks large financial resources, we welcome any donations in the Lord’s name, if made in good faith,” he said.

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