

Lithuanian Human Rights Activists Launch Legal Challenge to Government Efforts to Build Convention Center Atop Historic Jewish Cemetery

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A view of the abandoned “sports palace” build by Soviet authorities on top of a 15th-century Jewish cemetery in Vilnius. Photo: Screenshot.

A Lithuanian human rights organization on Monday filed a preventative claim with the district court in the country’s capital, Vilnius, to block the government’s plans to build an expansive new conference center on the site of the Old Šnipiškės Jewish Cemetery, where thousands of graves are buried beneath the surface.

“Active members of the Jewish community, non-Jewish Lithuanian human rights activists, and people of Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) heritage internationally have been trying for years to draw the attention of authorities to a project that would cause untold harm to Lithuania’s reputation and make way for a congress center that many people of conscience would, on principle, refuse to enter in the years to come,” declared an accompanying statement from the European Foundation of Human Rights (EFHR), the NGO that filed Monday’s claim.

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The cemetery — used between the fifteenth and early nineteenth-centuries at a time when Lithuania was a major center of Jewish life — was destroyed by Soviet authorities in 1949 to make way for a 15,000-seat soccer stadium.

In 1972, the stadium was converted into a “sports palace.” The structure lay abandoned for several years before, in 2016, the Lithuanian government announced plans to build a multi-million dollar convention center on the site.



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Among the leading Jewish religious authorities from around the world to have protested the government’s plans was the Chief Rabbi of Israel David Lau. In a Jan. 2018 letter to Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lau pointed out that the site “contains the remains and bodies of tens of thousands of Jews.”

Wrote Rabbi Lau: “I appeal to you to do as much as possible to prevent any harm to the martyrs of Israel and to those buried there and not to desecrate this holy cemetery.”

An international campaign opposing the site development garnered the support of several US legislators, with a bipartisan group of 12 members of the House of Representatives and three members of the Senate having sent letters of protest to the Lithuanian authorities over the cemetery.

In its statement, however, the EFHR said that these and other protests had “been ignored by the authorities and remain without meaningful response.”

The EFHR added that later this year, “Turto bankas (Lithuania’s state-owned Property Bank) is planning to announce a tender process for the Vilnius Congress Center’s rental in the future.” It said that at an earlier public meeting to discuss the bank’s tender, “it became obvious that nobody was taking seriously the vast catalogue of local and international opposition, or the damage to Lithuania’s name that would ensue.”

The EFHR ended by stating: "The old age of minority cemeteries (most emphatically of minorities that have largely disappeared locally as a result of genocide), and their illegal past Soviet abuse, including pilfering of the gravestones, is no moral license for that wantonness to be continued today in the realm of the European Union and its human rights values, least of all where thousands of a city's citizens still lie buried."

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