

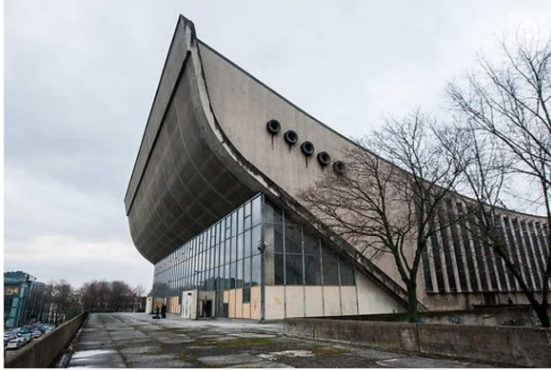
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Lithuanian leaders dismiss US Congressmen's fears about Šnipiškių cemetery

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Lithuania's leaders say that Šnipiškių Jewish cemetery would not be affected by the reconstruction of the derelict Sports and Concert Palace in central Vilnius, dismissing the fears voiced by a group of US Congressmen as ungrounded.



Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace © DELFI / Tomas Vinickas

The country's leaders say that the reconstruction project would be further coordinated with the Jewish community of Lithuania and the London-based Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe, which both have given their approval to the reconstruction.

"All Jewish cemeteries should be preserved properly, therefore, the decisions on their preservation are made in cooperation with the Jewish Community of Lithuania and the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe," Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaitė said in a comment provided to BNS by her press service.

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She spoke in comment to the call made by 12 US Congressmen to tear down the Sports Palace in central Vilnius and give up the plans of building a conference center there.

Supporters of the reconstruction emphasize that the burials that were in the site had been destroyed during the construction of the Vilnius Concert and Sports Palace during the Soviet rule, and the building along with the cemetery around it is listed in the register of cultural values and cannot be razed to the ground.

However, some Rabbis of ultra-orthodox Jews and supporting organizations say that the conference would vandalize the holy site, noting that taking the palace apart would be the only solution.

Congressmen: Palace Needs to Be Torn Down

Concerns over the government's plans of reconstructing the Sports Palace were voiced by 12 members of the US House of Representatives.

In their words, the very presence of the existing structure, which was built during the Soviet rule more than 40 years ago, "desecrates" the Jewish cemetery and "conflicts with the respect for human dignity, which forms the basis of Western civilization."

"By contrast, moving the convention center project to another site, and permitting the dismantling of the abandoned Sports Palace it was to replace, would affirm the Lithuanian government's commitment to basic human rights," reads the letter.

Lithuania's Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius says that the concerns of the US legislators is ungrounded.

"The fears about disrespectful behavior or something done in the burial sites are ungrounded. This will not happen," the minister told BNS on Monday.

He said he could understand that various Jewish organizations may have different opinions, however, emphasized that the government would coordinate all issues that may come up with the Jewish community and the London committee, which are seen as the biggest authorities.

Deividas Matulionis, adviser to Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, said the letter from the Congressmen came unexpected, as agreements on the territory of the Šnipiškių cemetery had been reached with Jewish organizations back in 2009.

In his words, the government is not discarding its plans of building the convention center, and dismantling the building "was never discussed."

Algimantas Degutis, deputy director of the Cultural Heritage Department, said that the Sports and Concert Palace was a cultural value, therefore, destroying one value in an effort to preserve another would be unfair.

"Under the current laws, it cannot be torn down, as it is a value of cultural heritage," he told BNS.

The reconstruction project has been put on hold amid suspicions of lack of transparency in the tender. The conference center's completion is expected by 2021.