

Patriarch Gets State Privileges, Protection

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill attending a meeting of prominent church officials in the Kremlin on Thursday. **Alexander Nemenov**

The church is separate from the state in Russia, the Constitution says. But the Federal Guard Service apparently has its own understanding of what that implies, as it treats Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill as a de-facto state official, rights activists said.

The agency, which is responsible for the security of senior officials, provided its services to Kirill free of charge, the pro-secularism group Zdravomysliye (Good Sense) [reported](#) on its web site.

The group filed an enquiry with the agency asking why the patriarch receives such treatment. A written reply dated Jan. 21 said it was made on the order of the president “in accordance with Article 80 of the Constitution.”

That article states merely that the president is the guarantor of the Constitution and does not mention privileges for religious leaders.

“This reply looks like a mockery. Bureaucrats explained a violation of the Constitution by referring to an article that says the president is the guarantor of the Constitution,” Zdravomyslie head Artyom Safronchuk told The Moscow Times.

An earlier letter from the agency, dating back to December, cited federal legislation on state security, not a presidential decree, as the reason for protecting the patriarch.

“If necessary, state-sponsored security can be provided to the third parties by decision of the president,” said the letter, signed by the service's spokesman, Alexander Ryaskov.

But the legislation in question limits “third parties” to state officials and does not cover religious leaders.

The Federal Guard Service was not available for the comment Thursday. The Kremlin has not commented on the matter.

Safronchuk, 30, a self-confessed atheist, said he took up the matter because his group is trying to combat the growing influence of religion on Russian society.

“I deeply believe that preferences given to any religious group are a threat to national security,” he said.

But Valery Streletsky, who was a senior official in the presidential security service during Boris Yeltsin's tenure in the 1990s, said the tradition of guarding the patriarch goes back to Soviet times.

“He was and will be guarded. Even though the church is separate from the state, the patriarch is seen as an instrument of state power,” Streletsky told The Moscow Times last week.

For Kirill, state-sponsored security guards are an indication that he is a part of the ruling elite, said religion expert Alexander Soldatov.

“He considers himself a business and public figure. On one hand, he portrays himself as an accessible person, but on the other, it is difficult to get access to him,” Soldatov said by telephone.

Kirill, who presides over the biggest religious community in Russia, also enjoys the right to use a car with a flashing blue light, a notorious device authorizing vehicles to ignore most traffic rules.

The usage of flashing blue lights is another privilege reserved mainly for state officials. The Orthodox patriarch is currently the only head of a major religious denomination with such privileges, as chief rabbi Berl Lazar and supreme mufti Ravil Gainutdin lost the right to it in a governmental decision several years ago.

“We are complying with orders, though the mufti sometimes gets anxious when stuck in Moscow traffic jams,” Gainutdin's spokeswoman Gulnar Gaziyeva said.

Safronchuk of Zdravomysliye said his group — which claims to have 20 core members, but also thousands of followers — will continue the fight against state privileges for Kirill, and called on supporters to file their own requests on the matter with the Kremlin and Prosecutor General's Office.

Zdravomysliye's crusade for secularism is not limited to criticizing the patriarch. Last month, the group also financed the installation on Moscow streets of a series of billboards quoting the Constitution's words on separation of church and state.

It took the group three months to have the billboards placed, as activists had to go through more than 20 outdoor advertising companies, including industry leader News Outdoor, before they found a firm willing to process their unusual order, Safronchuk said.

The project was paid for by donations from citizens “who shared our civil position,” he said.

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