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Clergy Requested to Help United Russia

By Alexander Bratersky

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A former Kremlin adviser who is now the Volgograd region's deputy governor has confirmed that local officials asked priests to campaign for the ruling party from the pulpit.

But Oleg Matveichev said there was nothing wrong with it because it was a request, not a demand, Gazeta.ru reported.

The church was separated from the state back in 1918, but regional officials appear to have grown dissatisfied with the arrangement, Alexei Pluzhnikov, a Russian Orthodox priest in Volgograd, reported last week.

He wrote on his LiveJournal blog last Wednesday that local priests were given three hours' notice to get to the office of the district head without any further explanation.

Once there, they were greeted by a local official who "hinted" that they should help out with the campaigning, the priest wrote.

"You're so nice, so influential, so psychologically savvy ... give the congregation a hint that they should vote for United Russia," Pluzhnikov said they were told.

Russia votes for the new State Duma on Dec. 4 and United Russia has been struggling not to lose seats in the legislature, where it currently holds a constitutional majority.

Pluzhnikov said he lashed out at the official and left the meeting. He added in a separate blog post on Thursday that he would have rejected such a request regardless of which party made it.

Pluzhnikov did not identify the official who talked to priests, but said she was the deputy head of his district in charge of social affairs. This points to Larisa Kozhevnikova, the only female deputy head in the Sovietsky district, where his parish is located, according to the web site of the Volgograd administration.

District head Yury Matagov told Kommersant on Thursday that the priests were supposed to be asked to urge the public to go to the polls, but not instruct parishioners on how to vote. A spokesman for the Volgograd diocese could not be reached for comment Friday.

United Russia party boss Sergei Zheleznyak called the request "strange."

"District heads should seek advice from the priests rather than give advice to them," he said, Gazeta.ru reported Thursday.

But deputy governor Matveichev — who earned notoriety in 2010 while working for the Kremlin when he urged on his blog that the authorities should "crush the opposition with tanks in public squares" — said no harm was done.

"There was no pressuring the holy fathers — representatives of the district administration just wanted to talk to them about whether they wouldn't mind participating in the election campaign in some capacity," he said.

Church spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin made clear on Thursday that the clergy is explicitly banned from campaigning in any form, Gazeta.ru reported.

United Russia's opponents said they were not surprised.

A Just Russia's Oleg Mikheyev, who represents Volgograd in the outgoing State Duma, said the request follows a familiar pattern.

"Doctors are asked to talk to their patients and teachers to talk to their [students'] parents, urging them to vote for the ruling party," Mikheyev said by telephone Friday.

He was echoed by Galina Boldyreva, who heads the Volgograd branch of the liberal Yabloko party.

"The authorities in Russia have already merged with the church," she said.

The Russian Orthodox Church enjoys the open support of the ruling tandem of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, who are seen in Moscow's Christ the Savior

Cathedral on all major Orthodox holidays. But the church has never explicitly voiced any preferences in the Duma elections.

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