

Orthodox Church Official Entreats Activists to Forgive Political Opponents

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Orthodox Church spokesman Vsyevolod Chaplin said Friday that while the upcoming Orthodox holiday of Forgiveness Sunday is not the best day for protests, it is "not a sin" to attend them, and that demonstrators should forgive those who do not share their views.

At least two opposition events are planned in Moscow on Sunday: one called "Big White Circle," which will attempt to draw 34,000 participants to form a human circle around the Garden Ring, and another called "Farewell to the Political Winter," an unsanctioned gathering at Ploshchad Revolyutsii near the Kremlin. There are no major pro-Kremlin events planned for Sunday.

On Friday, Chaplin called on those who plan to attend the demonstrations to honor the spirit of the church holiday by burying the hatchet with their opponents.

"This is, first and foremost, a day of forgiveness. If the demonstrators forgive everyone with whom they have resentment and conflict, that will be the best action on Forgiveness Sunday," he said, Interfax reported.

Chaplin rejected the comparison of the current rise in opposition sentiments in Russia to the revolutions and political crises that have occurred recently in the Arab world, calling the "Russian spring" a religious event.

He said the upcoming period of Lent is "the true 'Russian spring,' which significantly differs from the 'Arab spring': the 'Arab spring' is chaos, [while] the 'Russian spring' is putting things in order in your soul, in our minds, in your life."

Publicly, the church has attempted to stay neutral during the recent period of increased political activity in the country, and Chaplin met last month with opposition leader Alexei Navalny. But generally, the church is seen as being a Kremlin ally.

Addressing Patriarch Kirill's recent meeting with presidential candidate Vladimir Putin at which the church head noted Putin's high chance of winning the upcoming election, Chaplin said the church does not support any particular political movement but does encourage people to vote.

"The church does not implore [people] to vote for X or for Y or against X or for Y," he said.

But "if you want to be off to the side, then don't be surprised that your voice isn't heard; don't say that the people don't understand and don't want to hear you," he said.

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