

Russian Church Says It Is Under Attack for Backing Putin

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Patriarch Kirill says the church is targeted because of its support for Putin. **Igor Tabakov**

Clarification appended

Russia's Orthodox Church says it is under attack from unspecified "anti-Russian forces" seeking to erode its authority, after it threw its weight behind Vladimir Putin before last month's presidential election.

An unusually strongly worded statement issued Tuesday listed a recent protest performance by an all-girl punk band in Moscow's main cathedral as well as media allegations against Patriarch Kirill as examples of such attacks.

"The attacks have become more prominent during the pre-election and post-election period, which shows their political and also anti-Russian motives," the Supreme Church Council said on its website.

The council called on Orthodox Christians to come to cathedrals across Russia on April 22

for a nationwide prayer "in defense of the faith, desecrated sanctuaries, the church and its good name."

The church's unequivocal support for Putin has angered many members of the anti-Kremlin protest movement in Moscow and other large cities, who view it as political meddling and an abuse of the church's position in society.

Seen as a modernizing figure in the Russian church, the largest in Orthodox Christianity, Patriarch Kirill called the 12 years of Vladimir Putin's rule a "miracle of God" ahead of the March 4 election, which Putin won convincingly.

In recent years, state TV has given a much higher profile to the church, Kirill is frequently shown in the company of Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, and the church has been granted the role of a de facto policy adviser to the Kremlin on an array of issues that affect people's everyday lives.

Kirill said the church felt threatened by the apparent upsurge in hostility against it.

"Today we are witnessing a powerful anti-church rhetoric, which has unfortunately coincided with Lent," Kirill told the council, calling on clerics to come up with an appropriate response.

In February, five masked performers from the Pussy Riot band stormed the altar of Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, singing "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" Three band members are currently under arrest.

The statement listed three other incidents in March in which Orthodox churches were desecrated, priests beaten and icons destroyed. It said all the events were part of the campaign against the church.

Meanwhile Kirill himself has become a target in pro-opposition media outlets whose authors question his alleged role in dealings around duty-free alcohol and tobacco imports in the 1990s as well as his alleged wealth.

"Anti-church forces fear the rising role of the church in the country. Such people are few in numbers, but some of them wield influence and are ready to use their resources to discredit the clerics," the statement said.

The church said it was also being ostracized by "those pushing through radical liberal values" for its stern opposition to homosexual marriages, consumerism, the spread of violence and adultery.

The statement could help Putin, who will be inaugurated as president on May 7, to further discredit his opponents among liberal intellectuals, eroding their support base among the nascent middle class.

The public debate over the Pussy Riot incident exposed a rift in the church between the more liberal clerics who called for forgiveness and hardliners who wanted the performers to be severely punished.

The council sided with the hardliners in the statement, saying the lack of repentance could

only "push the sinners into committing their sins again."

Clarification: The translation of the name of the song performed by Pussy Riot in Christ the Savior Cathedral on Feb. 21 has been improved. It has been changed to "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" in place of "Holy Mother, Throw Putin Out!"

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