

Church Is Under Attack, Kirill Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Patriarch Kirill speaking in an interview to Rossia 1 television Sunday.

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church used a Sunday prayer service and a state television interview to argue that the church he presides over is under attack from foes who he said fear its post-Soviet revival and want to destroy its places of worship.

Patriarch Kirill did not name the punk music group Pussy Riot but was clearly referring to the collective, three of whose members were sentenced to jail time for performing a "punk prayer" at the altar of a Moscow cathedral during which they criticized President Vladimir Putin.

Since the verdict on Aug. 17, which drew sharp Western criticism that Moscow said was politically motivated, vandals in Russia and Ukraine have cut down a handful of wooden crosses in support of Pussy Riot, but band members have condemned the vandalism and said they had nothing to do with it.

Kirill suggested that "opponents" were trying to derail the post-Soviet resurgence of Russian

Orthodox Christianity, the dominant faith since tsarist times, and he warned: "We will not stop."

Speaking in a state-television interview and at a service at Christ the Savior Cathedral commemorating the 1812 Battle of Borodino, which helped Russia defeat Napoleon, Kirill used military imagery to make his point.

"I cannot shake the thought that this is an exploratory attack ... to test the depth of faith and commitment to Orthodoxy in Russia," Kirill told Rossia television. "And today, I think those who launched this provocation have seen that standing before them is not a faceless, quiet mass ... but a people that is capable of protecting what it holds sacred."

He portrayed anyone attacking the church as an enemy of Russia, saying aggression against the church was "aggression against our cultural core, against our code of civilization."

At the service, where a crowd of thousands spilled onto the street outside, Kirill said the fight against Napoleon's forces 200 years ago was a lesson for today's Russia, which he suggested was threatened by "blasphemy and outrage."

"Those who would invite us all to mock our shrines, reject our faith and, if possible, destroy our churches" are "testing the people's ability to protect their holy places," he added.

Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich were sentenced to two years in jail for their stunt, during which they beseeched the Virgin Mary to rid Russia of Putin.

They were convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred, a charge they have denied. They said they were protesting Putin and the church's political support for him in what the Constitution says is a secular state.

Shortly before the Pussy Riot performance, Kirill likened Putin's time in power to a "miracle of God." Putin was prime minister at the time and in the midst of a campaign for the March presidential election.

Many Russians found the Pussy Riot protest offensive, but critics of the Russian Orthodox Church's leadership say it has overreacted and risks fomenting violence by repeatedly calling for believers to protect holy places.

Russian Orthodox activists have formed vigilante groups to conduct patrols and protect churches and cemeteries, and activists have harassed people expressing support for Pussy Riot.

Putin's opponents say the prosecution of Pussy Riot was part of a Kremlin crackdown on dissent. Lawyers for the three appealed the verdict and sentences late last month.

Kirill rejected concerns about growing ties between his church and the state, saying what is happening is "not a merger but the Christianization of society."

"That is what frightens our opponents. ... It is fear in the face of the fact that [Russian] Orthodoxy, which was practically destroyed in Soviet times, has been able to return to the life

of the people — not as much as we would like, of course. But maybe this whole uproar is being raised to stop us," he said. "I want to say: We will not stop."

Some 70 percent of the country's citizens describe themselves as Russian Orthodox Christians, but far fewer regularly attend church, though all major faiths have enjoyed revivals since the 1991 collapse of the communist Soviet Union.

Putin, a former KGB officer in power since 2000, has tried to balance promoting the church, which is identified with the country's ethnic Russian majority, with celebrating a secular state of many religions.

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