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Duma Deputy and Bikers Take Plunge for Epiphany

By Alexander Bratersky

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Clergymen and laymen dressed in bathing suits amid lows near minus 15 C passing one another during an Epiphany event in Moscow's Strogino district. **Igor Tabakov**

ISTRA, Moscow Region — Konstantin Subbotin, a State Duma deputy from the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, peeled his clothes off late Friday night and jumped into an ice hole shaped like a big cross. A Russian Orthodox priest, more than 20 bearded bikers from the known Moscow-based club Night Wolves, and one television journalist followed suit.

Subbotin, 32, and the bikers spent several hours in traffic before arriving at the small wooden hotel in the Moscow region to take part in the traditional Orthodox festival of Epiphany, which commemorates Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.

The Epiphany festival takes place every year after the Russian Orthodox Christmas and is marked by masses of people jumping into freezing water. According to the Interior Ministry, 2.2 million Russians across the country took part in religious services and baptizing over the

weekend, despite the chilly weather. Temperatures on Friday night dipped below 15 degrees Celsius.

Meanwhile, those not brazen enough to dip into iced-over rivers and lakes lined up to collect holy water at churches. A Moscow Times reporter who stood in an hour-long line at a church in southern Moscow observed people who parked their luxury cars on church property and appeared to give bribes to security officers to avoid the wait. There were also two volunteers with Soviet-styled sleeve patches, marked "Druzhinnik" (Guardian), patrolling the inside of the church.

Overall, about 53,400 police officers, 1,000 soldiers, 3,400 private security personnel, 6,500 volunteers and 4,800 Cossacks were in place to ensure safety at the weekend's events, police said.

The bikers arrived to the frozen river by Istra in the Moscow region with their wives and girlfriends, though not on motorcycles. Cross-shaped ice holes, called "Iordani" in honor of the Jordan River, and a traditional Russian banya were set up for the bikers ahead of their arrival.

Night Wolves leader Alexander Zaldostanov, nicknamed the Surgeon, headed the nightly excursion. Zaldostanov got worldwide attention after taking part in a bike tour alongside then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin last July.

The Epiphany ritual wasn't new for Duma Deputy Subbotin, who said that he first took part in such activities in Yekaterinburg when he was 26 years old and the weather was minus 29 degrees Celsius.

"I remember then I was sick and sneezing. By the next morning I'd fully recovered," said Subbotin, who also recalled that he had to abandon his slippers by the lake because they were frozen.

Subbotin's Friday night jump prompted a sarcastic question from a REN-TV reporter who was reporting about the holiday. As soon as Subbotin got to the ice hole, the reporter asked him whether his baptizing was a "way to wash off sins after a plenary session."

While Subbotin replied that he represents a party known for its defense of the church, experts have said politicians always use the holiday to show off their devotion to the Russian Orthodox faith.

Russians have already gotten used to the likes of former deputy minister-turned-opposition leader Boris Nemtsov and his future bitter enemy former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov taking part in the winter Epiphany celebrations. This year participants also included Russia's chief sanitary official, Gennady Onishchenko, known for his often extravagant comments on health subjects.

Onishchenko took part in the Epiphany festival but warned Russians who suffer from the flu or other diseases to abstain from jumping into the ice holes and to check the quality of the water in them.

"The quality of water in a pool you are jumping in should comply with the norms,"

Onishchenko said in comments carried by RIA-Novosti.

Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, also warned Russians on the eve of the Epiphany not to turn it into a "folklore holiday." His message was communicated to the priests who used various words to translate it to the churchgoers as well as the mass public.

"Jumping into cold water is a business for people whose bodies are strong. The most important thing is an internal cleansing, which allows us to separate ourselves from Kirkorov and all kinds of pop-music noise," said Dmitry Pershin, a Russian Orthodox priest who took part in the Epiphany ceremony and later jumped into the Istra River himself.

It is unclear why Father Dmitry mentioned the famous pop artist Filipp Kirkorov in his speech, but the artist has come under fire from the church for getting onto the ambo — a violation of church etiquette — during the christening of his daughter in April, as well as for christening a child that was born by a surrogate mother.

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