

Russian Orthodox Cleric Allegedly Denied Entry to Ukraine

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A top cleric from the Russian Orthodox Church said he was refused entry to Ukraine this week amid an escalating stand-off between Moscow and Kiev over separatist unrest in Ukraine's east.

The church's Department of External Relations said its head, Metropolitan Hilarion, was turned back on Friday at the airport in the eastern city of Dnipropetrovsk where he came to award a prize to a local cleric.

"I was given no explanation," Hilarion told Russian state news channel Rossiya 24. "Apparently my name, and possibly the names of other Church hierarchs, are on a list of people who are banned from entering Ukraine."

The Ukrainian border guard declined to comment.

Ukraine said last month it was introducing stricter border controls on Russian men "of active age" trying to enter the country as Kiev struggles to quell the unrest.

The Russian Orthodox Church has said it takes no sides in the Ukraine conflict but, if the blacklisting of Hilarion or his ally clerics is confirmed, it would mean Kiev is wary they could pose a threat to the unity of Ukraine.

Hilarion's church exercises considerable influence beyond Russia through millions it counts as its flock in other former Soviet republics. As such, is a natural partner in Vladimir Putin's drive to re-integrate the region.

Critics accuse the Russian Orthodox Church, resurgent since the 1991 Soviet Union collapse, of aligning itself too closely with the Kremlin, accused by the West of stoking unrest in Ukraine where separatists hold a self-rule vote on Sunday.

The Russian church is also at loggerheads the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which split from Moscow after 1991 and does not back calls for autonomy, independence or joining Russia that are widespread in the east of the former Soviet republic.

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