

Russia's Patriarch Kirill Given Toy Fighter Jet by Factory Workers

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Patriarch Kirill addressing the workers on the importance of protecting Russia.

Correction appended:

Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has been presented with an unlikely gift for a religious leader as he toured a factory in Russia's Far-East — a toy SU-35 fighter jet.

Kirill was presented with the jet after giving workers at the civilian and military aircraft plant icons blessed by himself, the church said Tuesday in a statement on its official website.

The patriarch, with whom President Vladimir Putin has fostered increasingly close ties in recent years, addressed the workers on the importance of protecting Russia.

"Russia cannot be a vassal. Because Russia is not only a country, it is a whole civilization, it is a thousand-year story, a cultural melting-pot, of enormous power," state-run RIA Novosti quoted him as saying.

"In order for us to be able to live a sovereign life, we must, if necessary, be able to defend our

homeland."

Kirill's church is aligned with Putin's drive to reunite the former Soviet sphere of countries, with the Russian Orthodox Church exerting considerable influence through its 165 million members in Russia and other former Soviet republics.

Critics of the Russian Orthodox Church have said it is acting as a de-facto government ministry for Putin, including in foreign affairs, and have warned that such political engagements could backfire.

That also goes for Ukraine, where Kirill's Moscow Patriarchate is at odds with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate that seceded from Moscow after Ukraine gained independence in 1991.

The Moscow Patriarchate dominates in the Russian-speaking East, where Ukrainian forces have been battling a pro-Russian separatist insurgency since April.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly said Patriarch Kirill was given a SU-35 fighter jet by factory workers. In fact, Patriarch Kirill was given a toy model of the SU-35 fighter jet.

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