

Belarussian Orthodox Church Wants More Autonomy From Moscow Patriarchate

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Metropolitan Pavel

The Orthodox Church in Belarus has announced plans to seek greater autonomy from Moscow, as the Belarussian government this week expressed suspicion of Russia's political actions and concern over its currency.

A meeting of Orthodox leaders in capital Minsk this week ruled to petition the Moscow-based Patriarchate to grant the Belarussian church "self-governed" status — similar to fellow churches in Moldova, Estonia and Latvia, according to a document published on the Belarussian Orthodox Church website.

The petitioning has been entrusted to Minsk Metropolitan Pavel, who chaired the Tuesday meeting, according to the statement.

Belarus, a former Soviet republic and one of the few Moscow allies in Europe, has expressed recent concern about its alliance with Russia, amid supposed meddling in Ukraine and the nosedive of the Russian ruble.

At the start of December, President Alexander Lukashenko denounced Russia for its "indecent" ban of meat imports from his country. Moscow had argued that the restriction was prompted by the supposed smuggling of European food through Belarus in a breach of anti-Western sanctions imposed by Russia.

Lukashenko took the rhetoric up a notch this week, saying Russia's "behavior" was a threat to Belarussian security and a cause for "suspicion," according to remarks published Tuesday on his administration's website.

As the Russian ruble slumped, Lukashenko also demanded that Belarus' transactions with Russia be settled in dollars or euros, adding that Belarus would not let its own ruble take the fall along with the Russian one.

The Belarussian Orthodox Church enjoys freedom of belief under Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, but demonstrates loyalty to the administration.

In a four-page statement summarizing the results of its meeting, the Church expressed its "deep gratitude" to Lukashenko for his support, then thanked other government officials and religious leaders.

It tucked in the paragraph about intending to seek autonomy from Moscow near to the very bottom of the document.

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