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Putin, Patriarch Kirill Kick Off Orthodox Christmas Celebrations

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) attends an Orthodox Christmas service at a local cathedral of the village Otradnoye in Voronezh region Jan. 7, 2015.

The Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill prayed for peace in Ukraine and President Vladimir Putin attended mass at a village church in southern Russia, as Russia's Orthodox believers celebrated Christmas on Wednesday.

Russian Orthodox Church holidays are marked according to the old Julian calendar, with Christmas falling on Jan. 7, when it is celebrated by seven out of 10 Russians, according to polls cited by Russian media.

In one of the most high-profile Christmas services, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, said a prayer for peace in Ukraine at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral late Tuesday, according to a statement on the church website.

The holiday service was broadcast live by two of Russia's main state-run television networks — Channel One and Rossia 1 — as well as by religious channel Spas.

Putin, for his part, attended a Christmas Eve service at a village church near the southern city of Voronezh and visited an orphanage run by the parish, the Kremlin said in a statement Wednesday.

Russia's Orthodox tradition requires that Christmas be preceded by a 40-day fast, prohibiting meat, eggs or dairy products, and restricting other types of foods. Devout Orthodox believers tend to avoid large-scale feasts on New Year's Eve, but instead gather for a festive dinner on Christmas and then on the eve of the "Old New Year," which begins on Jan. 14 based on the Julian calendar.

Many Russians seem to take a more lenient approach to fasting, but a vast majority, 72 percent, celebrate Orthodox Christmas, according to a recent poll by the All-Russia Fund for Studies of Public Opinion, cited by the TASS news agency.

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