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Russian Orthodox Church Suspends Priest for Blessing Ukraine-Bound Fighters

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Vladimir Zaytsev

The Russian Orthodox Church has suspended a priest who publicly blessed a group of fighters heading to eastern Ukraine, encouraging them to battle government troops he called "fascist scum."

Vladimir Zaytsev, from the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, was filmed on March 12 sending off some 50 camouflaged fighters, some wearing balaclavas and waving the flags of two pro-Russian regions that want to break away from Ukraine.

"Fight against the fascist scum if needed, and I think it will be necessary," said Zaytsev, referring to Ukrainian government forces. "Don't be afraid of anything."

More than 6,000 people have been killed in the separatist conflict, which broke out last April. Moscow denies sending arms and troops to back the pro-Russian rebels, and says any

Russians fighting there are volunteers.

Local diocese authorities said in a statement that Zaytsev had been suspended until Easter because his actions "contradicted the position of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding what is happening in Ukraine."

It said his remarks should not be considered as a "blessing for carrying out a fratricidal war." Local Church officials would decide after Easter whether or not to reinstate him.

While some in Ukraine accuse the Russian Orthodox Church of colluding with the rebels, its head, Patriarch Kirill, has avoided publicly supporting them and said that all military action in Ukraine must stop.

The Church has a worldwide following of more than 100 million, including many Ukrainians. It has cooperated closely with the Kremlin under President Vladimir Putin, whose 15 years leading Russia were once described by Kirill as "a miracle of God."

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