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Coronavirus-Denying Russian Priest Captures Church With Cossack Fighters

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Father Sergei was barred from public ministry for disobeying orders to follow health guidelines during the pandemic. **Screenshot Youtube**

A prominent Russian Orthodox priest who was barred from preaching for his anti-coronavirus views has laid siege to a women's monastery, the 66.ru news website reported Tuesday.

Religious authorities barred Father Sergei, the ultraconservative spiritual leader of the Sredneuralsk women's monastery in central Russia, from public ministry in April for disobeying orders to follow health guidelines. Monasteries across Russia have been beset by Covid-19 cases amid Russia's outbreak.

Father Sergei chased out the Sredneuralsk monastery's installed leader and set up a perimeter of Cossack fighters to guard the site, according to Yekaterinburg's 66.ru.

"Father Sergei literally removed the mother superior from management," the Yekaterinburg diocese told the outlet.

He is now reportedly refusing to let in journalists as well as a priest sent by the local church leadership to replace Mother Superior Varvara, who had led the Sredneuralsk monastery since its founding in 2005.

“I’m not going anywhere... they’ll have to chase me out with police and the National Guard,” Father Sergei said Wednesday.

The diocese said Mother Superior Varvara and a number of abbesses left the monastery voluntarily “to avoid unnecessary infighting, to which Father Sergei is prone, and give him a chance to come to his senses,” Interfax reported.

Religious leaders in Moscow condemned Father Sergei’s seizure of the monastery but did not outline steps to recapture it.

“His actions entail real violence,” church representative Vakhtang Kipshidze told the Open Media news website.

“We hope that someone from his congregation will take stock of the situation and make the right decision not to damage their own security and spiritual well-being,” he said.

Father Sergei is known as the former confessor of several public figures including Russian lawmaker and former Crimean prosecutor Natalia Poklonskaya. The ex-policeman changed his secular name to Nikolai Romanov, in honor of Russia’s last emperor, and previously spent 13 years in prison for murder.

Father Sergei now faces an ecclesiastical court for defying bans on public ministry as well as a secular court on suspicion of inciting hatred. During its first session this week, Father Sergei accused Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill of betraying the faith.

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