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Moscow 'Outraged' as Bulgaria Expels Orthodox Church Head

September 22, 2023



Russian Orthodox Church representative Archimandrite Vassian. **Vladimir Bonyko / podvorie-sofia.bg**

Russia on Thursday slammed Bulgaria after it expelled the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in the southern Balkans nation.

Bulgarian authorities ordered the Russian Orthodox Church representative in Sofia, Archimandrite Vassian, to leave Bulgaria alongside two Belarusian priests following accusations that they acted in the interests of the Kremlin.

Bulgaria's National Security Agency said the three clerics were implementing Russia's "hybrid strategy to purposefully influence the socio-political processes in Bulgaria in favor of Russian geopolitical interests."

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Sofia's Russian church, which "for many years served as a place of common prayer between Russians and Bulgarians," would be closed in retaliation.

"We are outraged and shocked by the fact of what has happened," Zakharova said, accusing Bulgaria's leadership of "destroying not only political contacts between the [two] states, but also cultural and humanitarian ties between our peoples."

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On Friday, Russia's Ambassador in Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova, said Moscow would probably summon her Bulgarian counterpart to condemn the religious expulsions, but added that a closure of Bulgarian churches in Russia was unlikely.

"We're not barbarians to take tit-for-tat measures against the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Moscow," Mitrofanova said.

A member of the European Union and NATO, Bulgaria is a Slavic and Orthodox country with close historical and cultural ties to Russia.

But relations have been strained since Russia launched its war against Ukraine, with Sofia expelling 70 Russian diplomatic staff last year.

AFP contributed reporting.

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