

Russian Orthodox Clergy May Run for Office

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Moscow, February 8 (ENInews)--The Russian Orthodox Church has ruled that hierarchs (church leaders) and clergy can run for office in exceptional cases when their presence is needed to fight "forces striving to use electoral power to fight the Orthodox Church."

A document passed on 2 February by the Bishops' Council, which was meeting in Moscow, describes potential opponents of the church as forces "including schismatics and those of other religions," without naming any specifically, and says the church has the right to pass moral judgment on political programs and statements when they touch on issues including moral relativism, family values, historical monuments and the environment.

The document stresses that each case would be considered individually, that candidates must be chosen by church hierarchs, and that even if they are running for office, candidates cannot violate the Russian Orthodox Church's rule against clergy joining political parties.

It also makes clear that it is referring not just to clergy within Russia's borders. The jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church extends across the former Soviet Union. Ukraine, which has seen a volatile political situation, also accounts for a significant part of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In another document, passed on 4 February, the Bishops' Council, led by Patriarch Kirill I, said clergy and lay people must use all legal means to fight "blasphemy and slander" against the church in modern society.

The Russian Orthodox Church is playing an increasingly prominent role in Russian society, but is also facing growing criticism. According to the document, "slander should be differentiated from criticism of negative phenomena in the life of the earthly church that need to be corrected and overcome from the point of view of Christian teaching."

Some Russian Orthodox clergy were involved in politics in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the Soviet Union disintegrated, and there were priests in Parliament under the tsar and in politics after the February Revolution of 1917 that brought down the tsar.

President Dmitri Medvedev, whose wife, Svetlana, is a prominent patron of the Russian Orthodox Church, received the Archbishops' Council in the Kremlin on 3 February. Medvedev told the bishops that the church is essential to overcoming the ethnic strife that has shaken Russia recently, pitting young Russians against Muslim migrants from the Northern Caucasus. "Today, a great deal depends on your views, your sermons, your teaching, the pastor's word directly addressed to young people," said Medvedev.

Some Muslim leaders in Russia have said Muslim clergy might follow the example of the Russian Orthodox Church and run for office as well.