

Patriarch Kirill Launches Facebook Page

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The  **Moscow Times**

A Facebook page dedicated to Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill was launched Tuesday to feed growing interest in the divisive religious figure who has embodied the church's thickening ties with newly inaugurated President Vladimir Putin.

Kirill has openly supported Putin, whose campaign and election to a six-year term in March were dogged by regular street protests against his rule.

The silver-haired Kirill, who has warned against "manipulation" on the Internet, is shown at the top of the page deep in prayer over a large golden chalice and crucifix.

"There is growing interest on the Internet in what the patriarch is doing and his trips, and this is a step toward meeting [Internet] users," said an Orthodox Church official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The patriarch himself uses the Internet to seek out information."

Kirill and the church's profile have grown in Russia since female punk band Pussy Riot barged into Moscow's main cathedral Christ the Savior earlier this year and gave an impromptu protest performance, singing "Mother of God, throw Putin out!"

Three band members are in detention. Kirill's calls for their harsh punishment have divided opinion and ignited a debate over the church's role in politics. Kirill has defended Putin, calling the former KGB spy's 12-year rule "a miracle of God."

The Facebook page, which included numerous pictures of the spiritual leader meeting with the pious, already had nearly 900 "likes" only hours after its launch.

At the height of Russia's anti-Putin protest movement, which has largely been organized over social-networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, Kirill warned against trusting the Internet, saying it left people open to "manipulation."

A black-and-white picture halfway down the page shows a young Kirill in black clerical garb.

Last month, Kirill led thousands of Russians in a prayer to defend the church from what it calls an attack by anti-Russian forces trying to erode its authority.

Critics have accused Kirill of ostentatious behavior they say is unbecoming of a patriarch. Kirill has been criticized over his alleged ownership of a luxury watch and for winning thousands of dollars in compensation in a lawsuit against neighbors of an apartment he owns in central Moscow. Aides have dismissed the criticism.

The Russian Orthodox Church has enjoyed a resurgence since the end of atheist Soviet Communist rule in 1991 and has taken an increasingly active role in politics since then.

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