

Orthodox Youth Group Formed as Surkov Becomes Religion Envoy

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September 02, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

Orthodox Church officials have announced plans to set up a nationwide youth movement, just days after Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, formerly the Kremlin's point man on youth affairs, assumed full responsibility of overseeing ties with religious organizations.

Tens of thousands of young people are ready to join the movement, tentatively called the Voluntary Association of Orthodox Youth, Vadim Kvyatkovsky, who is responsible for youth affairs in the Moscow Patriarchate, told Interfax on Friday.

He said the organization would be open to representatives of the entire political spectrum and be headed by Bishop Ignaty Bronnitsky, who chairs the Patriarchate's youth affairs department.

The move comes as the Russian Orthodox Church faces unrelenting criticism both at home and abroad over the Pussy Riot case.

President Vladimir Putin endorsed the idea of an Orthodox youth movement in July.

While visiting the Lake Seliger youth camp, he said he would support such a movement if it does not become "a new quasi-Orthodox Komsomol," a reference to the Soviet Union's all-embracing Communist youth league.

Kvyatkovsky, however, was adamant that the initiative was by no means artificial but driven by grassroots demand in parishes. "Life is forcing us to make this happen," he was quoted as saying.

The Kremlin has in the past actively set up youth organizations to counter perceived political threats. One of the most publicized of such groups, Nashi, was founded in 2005 in the wake of Ukraine's Orange Revolution.

Surkov, believed to be the key official behind Nashi and other pro-Kremlin youth movements, was last week confirmed as the government's new point man on religion.

In an Aug. 28 decree, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev [appointed](#) Surkov chairman of the state's commission on religious organizations, a job hitherto held by Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets.

Surkov until last year oversaw domestic policies as first deputy head of the presidential administration, a job that included ties with religious organizations. He was appointed a deputy prime minister in December, a move widely seen as a demotion in the wake of mass anti-government protests.

However, Surkov's star rose again when he assumed the additional post of head of the White House administration in May. In early August, he was given the portfolio for religious affairs — but not the commission chairmanship.

Analysts have said Surkov's appointment to oversee religious issues in the government is a tool to repair the image of the Orthodox Church, which has suffered heavily not only over the Pussy Riot trial but also from scandals like the one prompted by the manipulation of a photo to remove an expensive watch on Patriarch Kirill's wrist.

A government source quoted by Kommersant on Friday said Surkov's appointment was his first political mission since he was removed from the Kremlin in December. The report also said that the commission's main tasks will be "to prevent the abuse of religion for extremist purposes" and to mend the negative image of the Orthodox Church, among other things.

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