



Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bulgaria Expelled
Because of Accusations of Espionage
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Clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church in Bulgaria Expelled Because of Accusations of Espionage

Summary

In recent weeks, a new diplomatic scandal broke out between Bulgaria and Russia over accusations of espionage. On September 21, 2023, the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security imposed "expulsion", "deprivation of the right of residence" and "ban on entering the Republic of Bulgaria" for a period of five years on one Russian citizen and two citizens of Belarus. It became clear from the Russian media that the Bulgarian authorities expelled three clerics of the Russian Orthodox church from the country. These are Archimandrite Vassian, head of the so-called Russian Church in Sofia and two other church clerics. All of them were expelled from Bulgaria on suspicion of espionage, and the church was closed. The Russian Embassy in Sofia, as well as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sharply criticized the decision and threatened retaliatory measures. The Russian Orthodox Church also reacted strongly.

On September 15, 2023, the Bulgarian media published information that the authorities in the Republic of North Macedonia had expelled three Russian diplomats and a senior Russian cleric from the Moscow Patriarchate. The reason for their expulsion was because of evidences that they are Russian spies. Later, the media revealed that the cleric was Vassian (Nikolay Zmeev), who has been heading the Russian Church "St. Nicholas" in the Bulgarian capital for the last five years.¹ Archimandrite Vassian was appointed in Sofia on March 7, 2018.

Since the end of November 2022, Zmeev has been appointed by the Russian Patriarch Kirill to be in charge of the North Macedonian Church as well.

According to information from the North Macedonian media, "unofficially, Zmeev coordinated the entire policy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archdiocese in terms of its church diplomacy during the last year, which led to a complete standstill in relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the issue of granting the autocephaly of the church in the Republic of North Macedonia. It turns out that for the last year the head of the Russian Church in Bulgaria has been traveling to Skopje every month, and the North Macedonian Prime

¹ <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101878707/rsm-goni-trima-ruski-diplomati>
<https://www.mediapool.bg/predstoyatelyat-na-ruskata-tsarkva-v-sofiya-e-izgonen-ot-skopie-kato-ruski-shpionin-news351456.html>

Minister Stevo Pendarovski has stated at the beginning of June that the secret services received revealed that members of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church are working in favor of the Russian secret services.²

Just a week later, on September 21, 2023, the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security announced that coercive administrative measures of "expulsion", "deprivation of the right of residence" and "ban on entry into the Republic of Bulgaria" for a period of five years were imposed on one a Russian citizen and two citizens of Belarus.

It became clear from the Russian media that the three expelled people were clergymen. The one, who is a Russian citizen, was the same Archimandrite Vassian, the head of the Russian Church in Sofia. The other two were the secretary of the church and the personal driver of Archimandrite Vassian.³

According to the State Agency for National Security, the expulsion of the clerics was carried out in connection with their activities directed against the national security and interests of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian special services reported that they have evidences about the actions of the clerics, related to the implementation of various elements of the Russian Federation's hybrid strategy for purposefully influencing the socio-political processes in the Republic of Bulgaria in favor of Russian geopolitical interests.⁴

In front of the media, the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria Eleonora Mitrofanova commented on the expulsion of the clerics as follows: *"I will not talk to you, I have nothing to tell you, because no one has fallen lower than this bottom"*. The Russian embassy's website stated that, according to Russia, it is obvious *"... that the current leadership of Bulgaria has set itself the task of destroying not only the socio-political, cultural and humanitarian ties between our countries, but also to break the relations between the sister Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches and to embitter the Russian and Bulgarian peoples against each other. We emphasize that the responsibility for the headlong degradation of bilateral interaction rests entirely on the Bulgarian side"*⁵

Archimandrite Vasion told "Rossiya 24" that he did not know why he was expelled. *"As far as I understood from the media, we are accused of defending the position of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the schism in Ukraine, because the so-called bishop is not at all -*

² <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32596218.html>

³ <https://www.dans.bg/bg/press-releases-menu-bul/2034-nalajeni-pam-chujdi-grajdani-21092023-art-bul>

⁴ <https://www.dans.bg/bg/press-releases-menu-bul/2034-nalajeni-pam-chujdi-grajdani-21092023-art-bul>

⁵ <https://7dnibulgaria.bg/archives/216515>

imposters who do not have any apostolic succession. This is very dangerous and will lead to global Orthodoxy becoming a sect," said Archimandrite Vassian.⁶

Vassian pointed out also that until that moment he had a fruitful relationship with the Bulgarian church, he was part of many holidays and did not expect such development of relations between the two fraternal churches.⁷

The news about the expelled clergy also provoked political comments.

GERB deputy and former foreign minister Ekaterina Zaharieva commented that the secret services are doing their job: *"I suppose it's no secret to anyone that, unfortunately, the Russian Orthodox Church is being used for Russia's geopolitical interests, for hybrid actions, for expanding influence. This is part of the long-term strategy of Putin and his regime. So I am not surprised by the actions of the State Agency for National Security, as the secret services do their job for the national interest of Bulgaria."*⁸

Finance Minister Asen Vassilev told one of the national televisions that the government is absolutely certain that it expelled *"a Russian spy and not an ordinary priest, because the information about agents in the Russian Church also came from partner secret services. The only problem is that he worked in Bulgaria for 5 years, and the State Agency for National Security did not detect him earlier."*⁹

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia reacted strongly. The speaker of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zaharova stated that she was outraged and shocked by the expulsion of the Russian Orthodox Church clerics from Bulgaria and called the decision of the Bulgarian authorities to expel the Archimandrite Vassian *"another destructive step"*.¹⁰

A few days later, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Bulgarian ambassador to Moscow, Atanas Krastin and before him, Moscow expressed a protest in regard to the expulsion of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sofia.¹¹

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<https://nova.bg/news/view/2023/09/25/426945/%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%85-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%89%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B2-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D1%86%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%B0/>

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ <https://bntnews.bg/news/reakcii-sled-ekspulsiraneto-na-trima-sveshtenici-zaradi-shpionazh-v-polza-na-rusiya-1248685news.html>

<https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101881013/dans-ekspulsira-rusnak-i-dvama-belarusi>

⁹ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Asen-Vasilev--Izgonihme-ruski-shpionin--a-ne-obiknoven-sveshtenik--Za-5-godini-DANS-ne-sa-go-zasekli/327257/2/0>

¹⁰ <https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/15589245>

¹¹ <https://bntnews.bg/news/ruskoto-vanshno-ministerstvo-izvika-balgarskiya-poslanik-v-moskva-1249124news.html>

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, the expulsion of the clerics took place *"under a fabricated pretext and in a sacrilegious and offensive form."* The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated that *"Another provocative attack by the Bulgarian authorities, which fully fits into the current Euro-Atlantic guidelines for "combating Russian influence", will inevitably lead to unpleasant consequences - above all for its initiators. At the same time, we are firmly convinced that their plans aimed at undermining centuries-old spiritual ties and traditions of friendship between the peoples of Russia and Bulgaria have no prospects and are doomed to failure".*¹²

With the expulsion of the head of the Russian Church in Sofia, the activity of the church was suspended and it cannot be restored by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, because the Russian Church is not under its jurisdiction. The Russian Church "Saint Nicholas" was built in the period 1907-1914 at the initiative of the Russian Embassy for the needs of Russian immigrants in the Bulgarian capital. Originally conceived as a chapel for the Russian embassy in Bulgaria, the church almost immediately lost its role after 1917. After the Second Russian Revolution, priests and bishops from the so-called "Russian Church Abroad" began to serve in it, and the already separate church became the center of numerous Russian immigrants to the country. After 1947, the church was handed over to the Moscow Patriarchate, which manages it to this day, and the building is owned by the Russian Federation.¹³

Meanwhile, Russia's ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova, told TASS that the Moscow embassy will take further actions regarding the "Saint Nicholas" Church in Sofia, in coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church.

"All actions regarding the Russian Church in Sofia will be taken in accordance with the decision of the Russian Orthodox Church. So far we are not aware that Patriarch Kirill has received a letter from Bulgarian Patriarch Neofit, we do not know the decision of the Russian Orthodox Church," said Mitrofanova.¹⁴

¹² <https://offnews.bg/sviat/ruskoto-vanshno-izvika-balgarskia-poslanik-obviniavat-ni-v-koshtunstv-809231.html>

¹³ <http://podvorie-sofia.bg/bg/main/>

¹⁴ <https://dnes.dir.bg/politika/rusiya-privika-balgarskiya-poslanik-zaradi-ekspulsiraneto-na-sveshtenitsite-y>

Conclusion

The expulsion of Russian citizens accused of espionage in Bulgaria comes against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine, which has seen many countries around the world, including Bulgaria, impose heavy economic sanctions against Moscow in 2022. Russia on its side has declared Bulgaria and the rest such countries as "hostile".

In June 2022, Bulgaria expelled 70 Russian diplomats and employees of the Russian embassy in the country, again on charges of espionage.

Now, just a year later in Sofia, three clerics of the Russian church "St. Nicholas" are also accused of being spies.

For the head of the Russian Church in Sofia, whose secular name is Nikolay Zmeev, security experts claim that he has been working with a network of agents in favor of Russia for five years. Especially since the start of the war in Ukraine, Russian Orthodox Church authorities abroad have become front organizations for Russian intelligence services, according to an FBI report last month. According to media reports, the actions of all three expelled clerics from Bulgaria are connected to networks of intelligence activities abroad.¹⁵

According to the senator from Crimea and member of the Committee on International Affairs of the Russian Federation Council Sergey Tsekov, the expulsion of representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church from Bulgaria is another serious step against the Russian Federation, which will have serious consequences.¹⁶

However, the Bulgarian point of view on this case is completely different. The governing coalition and the majority in the parliament are extremely motivated to cut off any influence of Russia in Bulgarian society and are clearly making active efforts in this direction.

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<https://nova.bg/news/view/2023/09/28/427340/%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8E%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%88%D0%BF%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B8/>

¹⁶ <https://www.focus-news.net/novini/mejdunarodni/V-Rusija-preduprediha-Eskalacijata-s-Moskva-shte-bude-pagubna-za-Bulgariya-otnosheniyata-shte-se-vloshavat-i-v-budeshte-1837491>