



Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill conducts the Easter service in the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, Russia, April 24, 2022. Kirill has been removed from the latest round of European Union measures to punish Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the insistence of Hungary, four EU diplomats told The Associated Press. (Alexander Zemlianichenko, AP)

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Thanks to the insistence of Hungary, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church has been removed from the latest round of European Union sanctions to punish Russia's invasion of Ukraine, four EU diplomats told The Associated Press.

The sixth package of sanctions, which includes an embargo on most Russian oil imports into the 27-nation bloc by the end of the year, was approved by ambassadors Thursday following a political deal reached earlier this week by EU leaders.

The diplomats spoke on the condition of anonymity because the identity of the new individuals sanctioned has yet to be published. The sanctions will be adopted Friday by the EU Council.

Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church had been initially included in individuals the bloc wanted to sanction but the proposal needed to be approved unanimously. It was removed at the insistence of Hungary, which is perceived as Moscow's closest ally within the bloc.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban threatened to derail the whole package of sanctions at the leader's summit unless he got guarantees that his country would not immediately be affected by the oil embargo. Hungary is more heavily dependent on Russian energy than most EU nations.

The Hungarian government said sanctioning Kirill would have been inappropriate on grounds of respect for religious freedom.

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Kirill, the head of one of the largest and most influential churches in Eastern Orthodoxy, has justified Russia's invasion on spiritual grounds, describing it as a "metaphysical" battle against the West and its "gay parades."

If sanctioned, Kirill would have faced travel bans and an asset freeze.

Kirill has echoed Putin's unfounded claims that Ukraine was engaged in the "extermination" of Russian loyalists in the Donbas, the eastern region of Ukraine where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces since 2014.

According to the French presidency of the Council, those who will be sanctioned Friday include members of Russia's security and military apparatus, particularly those linked to massacres in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha.

Also being sanctioned are industrial and technological entities "linked to Russian aggression" and "oligarchs and actors of Russian propaganda and their family members."

Russia's biggest bank, Sberbank, will now be excluded from SWIFT, the major global system for financial transfers from which the EU previously banned several smaller Russian banks. Among other sanctions, three Russian media outlets accused of propaganda will be prevented from distributing their content in the EU.

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