



From left, Lyudmila Navalnaya and Anatoly Navalny, parents of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and Navalny's mother-in-law Alla Abrosimova visit the grave of the late Russian opposition leader son on the fortieth day after his death as per Orthodox tradition at the Borisovskoye Cemetery, in Moscow, Russia, Tuesday, March 26, 2024. (AP/Vitaly Smolnikov)

by Associated Press

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The patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church has suspended a priest who participated in services for the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Dmitry Safronov took part in Navalny's funeral as well as presiding at the commemoration on March 26, the 40th day after his death — an important Russian Orthodox tradition.

An order published Tuesday on the Moscow Diocese website demoted Safronov from his position as priest to that of a psalm-reader and stripped him of the right to give blessings or wear a cassock for three years. He also was transferred to another church in the capital.

No reason was given for the decision, which was signed by Patriarch Kirill, a key ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Navalny, 47, died Feb. 16 in the remote Arctic penal colony where he had been serving a 19-year sentence on extremism charges that were widely seen as politically motivated. The cause of death remains unexplained, although the politician's allies have blamed the Kremlin for it.

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Russian authorities initially refused to release Navalny's body, citing the need for further investigations. Safronov was among the clergymen who signed a public letter calling for the remains to be returned to his family.

During his more than two decades in power, Putin has boosted the standing of the Russian Orthodox Church, increasing its prestige, wealth and power after decades of oppression or indifference under Soviet leaders.

In turn, its leaders, like Kirill, have supported his initiatives. The church has thrown its weight behind the war in Ukraine and it has been commonplace to see its clergymen blessing troops and equipment for the campaign.