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UKRAINE: Did authorities crush Russian Orthodox Church Abroad parish?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Archbishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of the Odessa Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) has told Forum 18 News Service that the authorities in western Ukraine have crushed a budding parish of his church, at the instigation of Metropolitan Onufry, the diocesan bishop of the rival Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The head of the village administration, Vasyl Gavrish, denies claims that he threatened parishioners after the ROCA parish submitted a state registration application. When asked by Forum 18 whether an Orthodox church from a non-Moscow Patriarchate jurisdiction could gain registration, Gavrish replied: "We already have a parish of the Moscow Patriarchate here." Both Gavrish and parishioners have stated that the state SBU security service was involved in moves against the parish, but the SBU has denied this along with Bishop Agafangel's claim that there was pressure from the Moscow Patriarchate.

Archbishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of the Odessa Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) has accused the authorities of crushing a budding parish of his church, in the small village of Grozintsy in Khotin [Khotyn] district of Chernivtsy [Chernivtsi] region, in western Ukraine bordering Romania. "People were afraid of the authorities' threats and withdrew their signatures on the parish's registration application," he told Forum 18 News Service from Odessa on 27 September.

But the head of the village administration dismisses these accusations. "We didn't threaten anyone," Vasyl Gavrish told Forum 18 from the village the same day. One former parishioner, Zinaida Khantevich, told Forum 18 on 4 October that their priest Fr Aleksandr Leleka has now left the village, the parish has been abandoned and the registration application withdrawn, and the parishioners now attend the village church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The Holy Martyr Queen Alexandra parish, led by Fr Aleksandr, met for worship in Khantevich's home from early in 2005. She said up to 15 people would attend the Sunday liturgy on average. Problems began when ten parishioners, the number required by law for state registration, signed an application and submitted it in early August to the Chernivtsy office of the government's religious affairs committee, which is headed by Vasyl Naftas.

Bishop Agafangel claims that parishioners succumbed to threats that they would have problems at work and that their children would be expelled from school if they did not renounce their affiliation with his Church. He said that Ukraine's security police, the SBU, sent an instruction to Gavrish as the head of the village, and that on 1 September Gavrish visited the homes of church members. Gavrish is said to have threatened parishioners, to persuade them not to retain contact with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA). The bishop believes the impetus for the move came from Metropolitan Onufry, the diocesan bishop of the rival Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

"We were warned," Khantevich reported. "The authorities said they didn't want our church - they said it wasn't needed." But she said opposition to it mainly came from officials of the Chernivtsy region rather than the village.

Gavrish admitted to Forum 18 that the regional SBU branch had contacted him about the ROCA community, but claimed it had merely informed him that the parish existed and asked if he was aware of its existence. He denies that he went to the homes of the application signatories and threatened them. "I asked Zinaida Khantevich why she held services secretly in her home without telling us." Asked by Forum 18 why Khantevich needed to inform the local authorities of what she was doing in her own home, he responded: "Because it's on the territory of our village." He insisted - in defiance of the law - that the ROCA community needed registration before it could meet legally.

Gavrish pointed to the presence of registered Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witness communities in the village, claiming that this proves he does not discriminate against religious minorities. Asked whether an Orthodox church of another jurisdiction could gain registration he responded: "We already have a parish of the Moscow Patriarchate here."

Vasyl Svistyuk, press officer at the Chernivtsy regional SBU, denied that the security police had played any role in the crushing of the ROCA parish. "There was no interference and there will not be," he told Forum 18 from Chernivtsy on 28 September. Told that

both church members and Gavrish had confirmed that the SBU had been involved he replied: "Maybe your informants were mistaken." He denied that any SBU officer could have become involved at his or her own initiative.

Vasyl Naftas of the religious affairs office is away on holiday until 11 October, his colleagues told Forum 18. But a specialist in the office, Ivan Lepa, said that on 2 September Fr Aleksandr and a parishioner had arrived at the office and had voluntarily withdrawn the registration application.

Asked why the registration process had not been completed already within the 30 days prescribed by law, Lepa said that when "questions" over an application arise, the office asks the local administration where the religious community is based to confirm that the ten signatories "really exist" and that they have signed the application "of their own free will". He said that in such cases the office could consider the application for up to three months.

Lepa denied that there was any discrimination against the parish because it was affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) and denied that there had been any pressure from the Moscow Patriarchate not to register communities of other Orthodox jurisdictions. He said there was no ban on registering ROCA communities within the region. "If their documents are in order they will get registration," he pledged.

Asked what parishioners could have done if the village administration had refused to confirm the signatures on the registration application, he said the ten adult citizen church founders could come together to his office with the documents and their passports confirming their residence in the village and then "we have to register them".

Lepa also stressed that the law allows religious believers to hold services in private homes, whether or not a religious community has registration.

Now that the Holy Martyr Queen Alexandra parish in Grozinty no longer exists, Khantevich said she would no longer be hosting services in her home.

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For a personal commentary by Professor Myroslav Marynovych of the Ukrainian Catholic University, on the abolition by Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko of the State Committee for Religious Affairs, see F18News 16 March 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=526>. Professor Marynovych argues that without democratic change, it is unlikely that religious communities will escape government efforts to control them.

A printer-friendly map of Ukraine is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=ukrain>>

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