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UKRAINE: Official claims "social outrage" prevents Romanian Orthodox registration

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

A Religious Association of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine lodged a registration application in August 2024. The State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) did not accept or reject it by the legal deadline of November 2024. DESS head Viktor Yelensky denies it has rejected the application, but insists "broad consultations" and agreement with a different community, the state-backed Orthodox Church of Ukraine, are needed. When three parishes tried to transfer from the Moscow-linked Ukrainian to the Romanian Orthodox Church, officials threatened to send priests and male villagers to the front.

Ukraine's chief state religious affairs official, Viktor Yelensky, insists that his office has not rejected a registration application for a Ukraine-based branch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. However, it failed to accept or reject the application by 28 November 2024 as the Religion Law required. He told Forum 18 that the state-backed Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) must be involved in and agree any solution, even though it is a different religious community.

Asked why any solution must be acceptable to the OCU, Yelensky responded: "Because by establishing its structures on other canonical territories, the Romanian Orthodox Church always gets approval from the other local Orthodox churches. The refusal to confirm the establishment of those structures with Local Orthodox Church in Ukraine outrages society and local communities both in Chernivtsi and Odesa and is perceived as disrespect to Ukraine" (see below).

The much-amended 1991 Religion Law declares that religion is separate from the state and that the state does not interfere in religious organisations' affairs. "The state recognises the right of a religious community to be subordinate in canonical and organisational matters to any religious centres (administrations) operating in Ukraine and abroad, except for those management centres (administrations) located outside Ukraine in a state recognised as having committed or is committing armed aggression against Ukraine and/or temporarily occupying part of the territory of Ukraine .." (see below).

Yelensky failed to respond to Forum 18's request to explain on what legal basis he had failed to accept or reject the August 2024 registration application by the new Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine (see below).

Most ethnic Romanians live in Chernivtsi Region and in Odessa Region, both of which border Romania and Moldova. About 130 parishes – almost all in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church historically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate – hold services fully or partially in Romanian. They are served by about 200 ethnic Romanian priests (see below).

Yelensky denied to Forum 18 that organisations under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church are banned in Ukraine (see below).

The new Romanian Orthodox Association's lawyer Eugen Patra? (Yevgeny Patrash) lodged its application to the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) in Kyiv on 28 August 2024. The DESS extended the one-month deadline for consideration to the maximum three months, claiming "broad consultations" were needed. It then repeatedly failed to accept or reject the application (see below).

The Association lodged complaints to President Volodymyr Zelensky and to the Parliamentary Human Rights Commissioner (Ombudsperson) Dmytro Lubinets. Both appeals ended back with the DESS, the body that had failed to apply the Religion Law (see below).

Five days after the Association lodged the application, the SBU security service banned Patra? (a Romanian citizen only) from entry to his native Ukraine for three years. "The SBU spoke only in general formulations as to the reason for the ban, with no mention of the Church," Patra? told Forum 18. "I can only assume though that the ban is linked to that." The SBU did not respond to Forum 18's question as to whether it banned Patra?'s entry because he lodged the association's registration application (see below).

Patra? points to the fines the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg handed to Moldova in December 2001 for denying registration to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the Romanian Orthodox Church and in February 2007 for denying registration to the Moldovan True Orthodox Church. Moldova eventually registered both communities. Ukraine is subject to the jurisdiction of the Strasbourg court (see below).

Despite the absence of any legal reason why Romanian Orthodox parishes and organisations cannot gain state registration in Ukraine, officials have also repeatedly refused individual parishes' re-registration with new statutes specifying their affiliation with the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate (see below).

Parishioners of three ethnic Romanian Orthodox communities in Chernivtsi Region held meetings where they voted to disaffiliate from the UOC and to affiliate with the Romanian Orthodox Church. "Parishioners fear the communities will be liquidated if they remain with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church," an observer who is not a member of these churches told Forum 18 (see below).

The three Orthodox communities submitted their documents on 19 May to Chernivtsi Regional Administration with their revised charters, as required by the Religion Law. The re-registration applications were given to Olena Bodnar, head of its Culture Department, as she told Forum 18. The next day, 20 May, representatives of the three communities came to the Regional Administration to withdraw the applications (see below).

"As soon as the applications were lodged, the heads of the communities started getting phone calls from village mayors, law enforcement officers and others demanding that they withdraw the applications," a local resident familiar with the situation told Forum 18. "They threatened that otherwise any men that signed the applications would be sent to the front". Others say officials threatened to take all male residents to the front if the applications were not withdrawn (see below).

Bodnar denied that anyone had threatened the three Orthodox communities. "I've not heard of any threats. I've not heard of any threats to mobilise anyone," she told Forum 18. She refused to say what had happened once the communities lodged the re-registration applications. "I can't give any information. I am not in the office and don't have the documents to hand" (see below).

Fr Mihail Steg?rescu, a priest of a Romanian Orthodox diocese, serves in Komishivka (Hagi Curda) in Odessa Region. His parish had to register in 2005 as an autonomous Orthodox community with no affiliation. "Eight times we lodged re-registration applications under the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate," he told Forum 18. "Each time officials refused, so its registration stayed as it was." He said other local Romanian Orthodox parishes face the same re-registration denials (see below).

"It is strange that the authorities call for parishes to leave the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but when they leave for the Romanian Orthodox Church officials threaten them with mobilisation, trying to force them into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine," Patra? told Forum 18. "Each community must have a free choice of affiliation with no interference from the authorities" (see below).

Severe human rights violations in Russian-occupied Ukraine

Serious violations of freedom of religion and belief and other human rights take place within all the Ukrainian territory Russia has illegally occupied (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963).

Such violations include pressure not only on clergy and parishioners of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Pressure is also applied to clergy and parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is historically and ecclesiastically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate, who refuse to accept UOC dioceses being taken over directly by the Russian Orthodox Church.

State-supported Orthodox vs. other Orthodox

Successive Ukrainian governments have long desired to see a single dominant Orthodox Church. Such moves also involved obstructing the revival of the Romanian Orthodox Church in areas with an ethnic Romanian population which had been part of Romania until the Soviet invasion and annexation in 1940.

Fr Nicolae Asargiu, a Ukrainian-born Moldovan citizen and priest of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (part of the Romanian Orthodox Church), was working as a Bessarabian priest in his home village in the then Reni District of Odessa Region in the 1990s. This annoyed the local authorities and Orthodox clergy loyal to the rival Ukrainian branch of the Moscow Patriarchate, so Ukraine gave him a five-year entry ban in 1998. The entry ban expired in 2003 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=573).

Fr Asargiu "was the only one of our priests who was denied entry to Ukraine, but other priests were banned from working in individual villages during the rule of President Leonid Kuchma," the Bessarabian Orthodox Church's leader Metropolitan Petru Paduraru told Forum 18 from the Moldovan capital Chisinau in May 2005 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=573).

The government allowed other Orthodox jurisdictions to gain legal status. These included the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is historically and ecclesiastically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate. It also included from 1993 the Russian Orthodox

Church Abroad (which chose to remain completely separate from the Moscow Patriarchate), led from Odessa by Metropolitan Agafangel (Pashkovsky). Several Orthodox communities (including Romanian-speaking ones) were allowed to get registration as autonomous communities with no affiliation.

The government (led by the then President Petro Poroshenko) backed the formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018 and its successful move to gain recognition as autocephalous by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in 2019. The OCU brought together most of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, as well as some bishops and priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Ukrainian government stepped up moves against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is historically and ecclesiastically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate.

On 24 August 2024, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that he had signed Law No. 3894-IX banning the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) as well as Ukrainian religious organisations if they preserve their affiliation with the ROC. The Law came into force on 23 September 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2932).

The state has backed Orthodox communities which seek to transfer jurisdiction from the UOC to the OCU. Parishioners vote to choose the parish's affiliation, but force and violence sometimes accompany these transfers.

On 29 February 2024, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to "encourage and support the initiatives of the Romanian Orthodox communities in Ukraine to restore communion with the Mother Church, the Romanian Patriarchate, through their legal organisation in the religious structure called the Romanian Orthodox Church of Ukraine".

The Romanian Orthodox Church lists on its website its dioceses and parishes in countries outside Romania. As of July 2025, it notes that its Church in Ukraine "is in the process of organisation".

Ethnic Romanian Orthodox in Ukraine – whose parishes are currently part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) - are being forced by the impending ban on UOC organisations which preserve their affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church to look for an alternative home.

Local ethnic Romanian Orthodox appear to have various motivations for seeking to join the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate. Some look back to the time when Bukovina and Bessarabia were part of Romania and see this as a restitution of justice. Others want a fully ethnic Romanian spiritual home. Others again regard the state-backed OCU as uncanonical and fear it will impose Ukrainianisation.

Asked by Forum 18 on 21 July 2025 if the Romanian Orthodox Church is forbidden in Ukraine, Viktor Yelensky, head of the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) in Kyiv, responded: "Absolutely not." Asked about the status of the OCU, Yelensky responded: "The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is not a state/established church in Ukraine."

Ukrainian state officials have repeatedly urged the Romanian Orthodox Church to recognise the OCU as canonical, something it says must be decided at a pan-Orthodox level.

"I stress the primary importance of the issue of full recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Romanian Orthodox Church," the Ukrainian ambassador to Romania, Ihor Prokopchuk, told local journalists (<https://agerpres.ro/politic/2025/06/26/ambasadorul-ucrainei-subliniaza-importanta-recunoasterii-depline-a-bisericii-ortodoxe-a-ucrainei-de---1463268>) at the embassy in Bucharest on 26 June.

Asked whether the state treats Orthodox communities differently to communities of other faiths, Yelensky did not respond.

Equality, affiliation and registration in the Religion Law

The much-amended 1991 Religion Law declares in Article 5 that religion is separate from the state. "All religions, faiths and religious organisations are equal before the law," Article 5 adds. "The establishment of any advantages or restrictions for one religion, faith or religious organisation over others is not permitted."

The Law also declares the state's non-interference in religious organisations' affairs. "The state protects the rights and legitimate interests of religious organisations", Article 5 continues, and "takes note of and respects the traditions and internal guidelines of religious organisations, provided they do not contradict current legislation".

Article 8 declares: "The state recognises the right of a religious community to be subordinate in canonical and organisational matters to any religious centres (administrations) operating in Ukraine and abroad, except for those management centres (administrations) located outside Ukraine in a state recognised as having committed or is committing armed aggression against Ukraine and/or temporarily occupying part of the territory of Ukraine .."

The Law sets out how communities of any faith can determine which religious centre they might wish to belong to. Article 8 declares that the state recognises "the free change of this subordination by making appropriate amendments to the charter (regulations) of the religious community. The decision to change subordination and make appropriate amendments to the charter is adopted by the general meeting of the religious community. Such general meetings of the religious community may be convened by its members." Two-thirds of a community's members must take part in the meeting.

Any change of subordination of a local religious community requires the new statute to be registered if the community wishes to retain its legal status. Like new local religious communities, this requires at least ten adult citizens to sign the application and present it with the new statute and other documentation to the regional administration for registration.

Communities that are part of a larger organisation, whether based in Ukraine or abroad, must submit a document from the religious centre confirming that the community is part of it.

Central religious organisations seeking state registration must send their application to the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) in Kyiv.

Under Article 14, officials – whether at Regional level or at the DESS – must accept, reject or request changes to a registration application within one month. If officials believe they need to request more information from other officials, they have up to three months.

Officials refuse to consider Romanian Orthodox registration application

In Ukraine, approximately 200 ethnic Romanian Orthodox priests serve at least 300,000 Romanian speakers. About 130 Orthodox parishes – mostly in Chernivtsi Region and in Odessa Region, both of which border Romania and Moldova, as well as in Transcarpathian Region – hold worship services in Romanian, sometimes alongside Church Slavonic. All these parishes have been part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).

At a 25 August 2024 meeting, representatives of three Romanian Orthodox communities that had previously been part of the UOC – one in Chernivtsi Region and two in Odessa Region – agreed to found a new Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The meeting appointed Eugen Patra? (Yevgeny Patrash), a lawyer now based in Bucharest, as its representative.

On 28 August 2024, Patra? lodged the registration application on behalf of the new Association (seen by Forum 18) to the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience (DESS) in Kyiv. The three parishes were listed as members of the new Association. Included with the application was a document from the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate confirming that the new Association is part of it.

Viktor Yelensky, head of the DESS, responded on 27 September 2024, just within the one-month deadline specified in the Religion Law (letter seen by Forum 18). He chose to delay the application by seeking further assessments of it.

Yelensky claimed that "given that the issue raised problems of inter-state Romanian/Ukrainian and Ukrainian/Romanian relations and concerns the foundations of inter-church peace and civil harmony, and the rights of people belonging to ethnic minorities", the DESS needed to conduct "broad consultations both within the country, including with scholars, and abroad, including with the Romanian side".

Yelensky's letter made no reference to any provisions of the Religion Law in his assertions. "These are illegal demands," Patra? told Forum 18.

Yelensky wrote again on 6 November 2024 (seen by Forum 18). He did not say if the application had been accepted or rejected and made no reference to provisions of the Religion Law for failing to give a decision.

Yelensky claimed instead that "the issues raised in your appeal are very sensitive for Ukrainian and Romanian societies". He then said it would be "advisable" for agreements to be made between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Romanian Orthodox Church. He said the DESS was consulting Romania's Foreign Ministry, Romania's State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and the Romanian Orthodox Church. He did not explain why it is the role of the DESS to engage in such negotiations.

Yelensky had visited Romania in October 2024 to hold discussions with state officials and Romanian Orthodox Church representatives on "deepening inter-state relations over ensuring freedom of conscience" for Romanians in Ukraine and Ukrainians in Romania.

The DESS organised meetings in Bukovina in November and December 2024 which, as Yelensky stressed, included clergy from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).

Given the DESS' failure to adjudicate on the application within the maximum three-month deadline, the Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine could have lodged a suit against the DESS to court. "We didn't apply to court – for now - as we're hoping for a diplomatic solution," the lawyer Patra? told Forum 18.

Yelensky insists that the DESS "has not refused" registration of the Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. "The DESS merely noted that resolving this issue requires serious and multilateral consultations," he told Forum 18 on 18 July.

Yelensky then repeated to Forum 18 the arguments he had set out in letters to the community about what he saw as the need for agreement between the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate and the OCU.

Yelensky pointed to the Ecumenical Patriarch's recognition of the OCU in 2019. "This means that the OCU bears responsibility not only for Ukrainians, but for all Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, regardless of their ethnic origin," he insisted to Forum 18. "It is thus the OCU's responsibility to ensure the fulfilment of linguistic, liturgical, and other religious needs of Orthodox believers of Romanian, Bulgarian, Gagauz, and other ethnicities within Ukraine."

Yelensky refused to explain which part of the Religion Law empowered him not to take a decision on the registration application within the maximum three-month deadline.

Asked why any solution must be acceptable to the OCU, Yelensky responded: "Because by establishing its structures on other canonical territories, the Romanian Orthodox Church always gets approval from the other local Orthodox churches. The refusal to confirm the establishment of those structures with Local Orthodox Church in Ukraine outrages society and local communities both in Chernivtsi and Odesa and is perceived as disrespect to Ukraine."

"We fully respect Ukraine – we see no basis for these accusations," Patra? told Forum 18. "We simply want to exercise our rights."

Patra? points to the fines the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg handed to Moldova in December 2001 for denying registration to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Application No. 45701/99 (<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-59985>)) and in February 2007 for denying registration to the Moldovan True Orthodox Church (Application No. 952/03 (<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?i=001-79606>)). Moldova eventually registered both communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1313), the Bessarabian Metropolitanate in July 2002 and the True Orthodox Church in August 2007. Ukraine is subject to the jurisdiction of the Strasbourg court.

A resident of Chernivtsi who has been following developments (who is not Orthodox), told Forum 18 in July: "The state is more loyal to the OCU, even though all religious communities should be equal."

Appeals to President, Ombudsperson sent on to DESS

Frustrated by the DESS' refusal to process its registration application in accordance with the Religion Law, the Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine appealed to President Volodymyr Zelensky on 28 February 2025.

The appeal complained that "the intentional delay in registering the association leads to the unfavourable consequences of 'seizures' by other religious organisations of places of worship where services are held partially or completely in Romanian, a fact negatively perceived by the Romanian community in general".

On 20 March, the Cabinet of Ministers sent the appeal to the DESS. In a response on 18 April (seen by Forum 18), Viktor Yelensky failed to say why his office was not accepting or rejecting the registration application. He spoke instead about meetings the DESS had organised in Bukovina, as well as consultations with Romanian officials and Romanian Orthodox representatives.

Yelensky set out the DESS' aim: "Just as the Romanian Orthodox Church has an Orthodox Ukrainian Vicariate, which encompasses parishes of the Ukrainian tradition and is subordinate to Patriarch Daniel, the Romanian Vicariate, directly subordinate to the Primate of the OCU, should operate within the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), in which representatives of the Romanian national minority are guaranteed full and unconditional respect for their liturgical, linguistic, and ritual traditions and the necessary level of self-government."

Yelensky did not explain under which provision of the Religion Law he was aiming to organise how Orthodox Churches structure themselves.

On 12 June, the Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine appealed to the Parliamentary Human Rights Commissioner (Ombudsperson) Dmytro Lubinets. Hanna Barabash, the head of the department handling the right to freedom of religion or belief, responded the following day, saying the appeal had been sent to the Cabinet of Ministers, because it

oversees DESS' work. The Cabinet of Ministers in turn sent the appeal on to the DESS.

Forum 18 asked Barabash in writing on 23 July why the Ombudsperson's Office had refused to take up the issue of the refusal of the DESS to consider the application. Forum 18 had received no response by the middle of the working day in Kyiv of 25 July.

Yelensky's response of 16 July (seen by Forum 18) merely noted that the DESS "continues to conduct broad consultations on the establishment of Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine" and said the "final response" would be provided when these are completed.

The three communities that are part of the new Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine appealed to the Romanian President Nicușor Dan on 20 June.

Association representative banned from his native Ukraine - for lodging application?

On 28 August 2024, Eugen Patrașcu on behalf of the Religious Association (Administration) of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine lodged its registration application. On 2 September 2024, the SBU security service imposed on Patrașcu a three-year ban on entry to Ukraine.

Born in Soviet Ukraine, Patrașcu became a Romanian citizen (having to give up Ukrainian citizenship) and lives in Bucharest. He heads the Eudoxiu Hurmuzachi Romanian Cultural Centre in Chernivtsi, which has state registration.

Patrașcu found out that he had been banned from entering Ukraine only on 19 November 2024, when he was trying to travel to Chernivtsi. On 27 November, he tried to find out from the SBU why it had banned him. On 29 November, Mykhailo Petrov, head of the SBU in Chernivtsi Region, responded to Patrașcu (seen by Forum 18) confirming that it had ordered him banned from entry.

Patrașcu lodged a challenge to the ban in court in December 2024. The case is continuing in Chernivtsi Administrative Court.

"The ban came just five days after I lodged the registration application," Patrașcu told Forum 18. "The SBU spoke only in general formulations as to the reason for the ban, with no mention of the Church. I can only assume though that the ban is linked to that."

Patrașcu says the SBU has banned entry to Ukraine to other Romanian citizens over the years, including journalists and priests.

Forum 18 asked the SBU security service's Press Service in Kyiv in writing on 21 July 2025 why it had banned Patrașcu from entering Ukraine. It also asked whether he would be allowed in after 28 August 2027, when the three-year ban has expired. Forum 18 had received no response by the middle of the working day in Kyiv of 25 July.

Orthodox transfers of jurisdiction, multiple applications rejected

Orthodox priest Fr Mihail Stegărescu is ethnic Romanian and currently serves in Romanian in Komishivka (Hagi Curda), a village in Ismail District, Odessa Region. His church of St Peter and St Paul, which is regularly attended by several dozen ethnic Romanian parishioners, is part of the Romanian Patriarchate's Diocese of Southern Bessarabia, based in Cahul in neighbouring Moldova.

"We built the church ourselves from 2008," Fr Stegărescu told Forum 18 on 23 July. "We consecrated it in 2019." The community gained Ukrainian state registration in 2005 but as an autonomous Orthodox community with no affiliation.

"Eight times we lodged re-registration applications under the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate," Fr Stegărescu. "Each time officials refused, so its registration stayed as it was."

Until 2019, Fr Stegărescu served in St Paraskeva Church in the neighbouring village of Priozerne (Cemașir). The parish was first registered in 1991 as part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The UOC then ousted him and appointed a new priest. The parish still has state registration, though it is listed simply as the Orthodox Parish of St Paraskeva Church with no other affiliation.

Fr Stegărescu says the parish six times lodged applications for its statute to be re-registered listing the affiliation as the Bessarabian Diocese. "Officials rejected all these applications," he told Forum 18.

Fr Stegărescu said a new Romanian Orthodox church was built in the nearby town of Reni. "It gained registration in 2018, but again, only as an autonomous community. In 2023 it tried to re-register its new statute stating that it is part of the Romanian Patriarchate. Officials refused, saying you can't be registered under the Romanian Church because this does not exist in Ukraine. Officials did not fulfil the law."

Fr Stegărescu said a large new community has formed in Ismail. "It lodged a registration application as an autonomous community, but five times officials rejected it. They said: This is wrong, that is wrong." He notes that the statute the community submitted was

modelled on the statute of a Romanian Orthodox parish in Chernivtsi that gained registration as an autonomous community in 2023.

Fr Steg?rescu says the communities can function, but the Romanian Orthodox Church as a whole has no legal status in Ukraine. "So officials don't invite us to events and we can't invite priests from Romania to serve here permanently – they can come for only three months at a time." He adds that his Bishop, Veniamin (Goreanu), can visit from Moldova, "but he is kept under close watch".

In Chernivtsi, the Chapel of the Metropolitans of Bukovina – built in the 19th century, restored in the 1990s and used as a place of worship by Romanian believers for the last three decades – is located on the central alley in the Orthodox part of the city's cemetery. The crypt contains the tombs of prominent local Romanians, including many Bukovina hierarchs. In September 2024, the local authorities took over the chapel and offered it to the OCU. It is now locked and unused.

Orthodox churches with both ethnic Ukrainians and Romanians in the congregation are also affected. On 17 June 2025, several dozen masked men interrupted the worship service at Chernivtsi's Holy Spirit Orthodox cathedral. The cathedral – currently in the hands of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) – holds services mainly in Church Slavonic but also in Romanian. The intruders beat some of the clergy, according to local media. That day, hundreds of people gathered in front of the cathedral, including many Romanians, who oppose the cathedral's takeover by the OCU.

Two more UOC churches (one of which held some services in Romanian) were also seized in Chernivtsi.

Two other UOC churches with similar significance and history, and in which services were also held in Romanian, were also taken over in the city of Storozhynets.

In a meeting with UOC Metropolitan Melety (Yegorenko) of Chernivtsi and Bukovina in May, about 30 UOC priests expressed their intention to affiliate with the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate told Radio Free Europe's Romanian Service (<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/comunitati-romanesti-ucraina-afiliere-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-memoriu-presdintele-romaniei/33457125.html>) that in early May it received requests from four large communities in the Chernivtsi Region, accompanied by hundreds of signatures from priests and parishioners, to come under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church, "which is what happened".

The Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate stated that it is not providing the names of the communities and priests, "for their protection from the subsequent threats and coercion to which they were subjected."

Threats precede withdrawal of re-registration applications

Parishioners of three ethnic Romanian Orthodox communities in Chernivtsi Region – from Nyzhni Petrivtsy, Hrushivtsy and Boiany – held meetings where they voted to disaffiliate from the UOC and to affiliate with the Romanian Orthodox Church. "Almost no one was against the decision," an observer who is not a member of these churches told Forum 18. "Parishioners fear the communities will be liquidated if they remain with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church."

The three Orthodox communities submitted their documents on 19 May to Chernivtsi Regional Administration with their revised charters, as required by the Religion Law. "The chancellery recorded receipt of the applications," a local resident familiar with the situation told Forum 18.

The re-registration applications were given to Olena Bodnar, head of its Culture Department, as she told Forum 18 on 23 July.

The next day, 20 May, representatives of the three communities came to the Regional Administration to withdraw the applications.

"As soon as the applications were lodged, the heads of the communities started getting phone calls from village mayors, law enforcement officers and others demanding that they withdraw the applications," the local resident told Forum 18. "They threatened that otherwise any men that signed the applications would be sent to the front. After they went the following day to withdraw the applications, the calls and unpleasantness stopped."

Other reports say threats included to mobilise the priests and all the men in these villages and send them to the front, not just those that signed the re-registration applications. "The authorities told us that they would search in detail, in the village, all the young people and take them to the front," one of the priests told Radio Free Europe's Romanian Service (<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/comunitati-romanesti-ucraina-afiliere-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-memoriu-presdintele-romaniei/33457125.html>).

Two priests from Chernivtsi Region confirmed to Radio Free Europe's Romanian Service (<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/comunitati-romanesti-ucraina-afiliere-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-memoriu-presdintele-romaniei/33457125.html>) for a 29 June article that the three communities had been forced to withdraw the applications.

Bodnar denied that anyone had threatened the three Orthodox communities. "I've not heard of any threats. I've not heard of any threats to mobilise anyone," she told Forum 18 on 23 July. "They brought the documents and there is a procedure for dealing with them." She refused to say what had happened once the communities lodged the re-registration applications. "I can't give any information. I am not in the office and don't have the documents to hand."

"We wanted to leave the affiliation of the Russian Church, including in the midst of the war, which Patriarch Kirill supports," an ethnic Romanian Orthodox priest from a Romanian community in Chernivtsi Region, who wants to affiliate with the Romanian Orthodox Church, told RFE/RL (<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/comunitati-romanesti-ucraina-afiliere-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-memoriu-presdintele-romaniei/33457125.html>). "But we want to return to the Romanian Orthodox Church, not to join the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. We are being hindered on all sides."

The priest did not want to give his name for fear of reprisals, after the threats to the three communities which tried to lodge re-registration applications.

"It is strange that the authorities call for parishes to leave the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, but when they leave for the Romanian Orthodox Church officials threaten them with mobilisation, trying to force them into the Orthodox Church of Ukraine," Eugen Patra? told Forum 18. "Each community must have a free choice of affiliation with no interference from the authorities." (END)

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