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UKRAINE: "Uncanonical and diabolical schismatics shouldn't exist"

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

Fr Anatol Curtev, a priest of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the Romanian Orthodox Church, is sceptical that the authorities will protect him and his parish in the village of Kamyshovka in the far south-west of Ukraine from violence. He and his parishioners claimed to Forum 18 News Service that the village's Russian Orthodox priest Fr Aleksei Grecu hit him on the head just before they started their separate liturgies on 12 March to mark the Sunday of Orthodoxy, and that Fr Grecu organised a brutal attack on him in the station of the nearby town of Izmail on 12 April. "It's a complete lie – I didn't hit him [Fr Curtev] or organise the attack," Fr Grecu told Forum 18, but admitted he was interviewed by police. "But if he's doing evil, what are we supposed to do? They're uncanonical and diabolical schismatics who shouldn't exist on Ukrainian territory." Fr Grecu dismissed any idea that the Bessarabian parish has any religious freedom rights. "We're not for democracy – we're Orthodox."

Members of an independent Orthodox parish in the village of Kamyshovka (Hagi-Curda in Romanian) in Izmail [Izmayil] district in the far south-west of Ukraine close to the border with Moldova are sceptical that the authorities will protect them from continuing violence. Parishioners – who are served by Fr Anatol Curtev, a priest of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate of the Romanian Orthodox Church – believe the violence is being orchestrated by the local Russian Orthodox priest, Fr Aleksei Grecu. "We know 100 per cent that it is the Russian Orthodox who are behind the attacks," the parish elder Vasili Iordachescu told Forum 18 News Service from the village on 19 April. "Their priest Aleksei Grecu hit our priest on the head on the Sunday of Orthodoxy and also organised the group of thugs that attacked him at Izmail station this month."

But Fr Grecu categorically denied the allegations. "It's a complete lie – I didn't hit him or organise the attack," he told Forum 18 on 20 April. "But if he's doing evil, what are we supposed to do? They're uncanonical and diabolical schismatics who shouldn't exist on Ukrainian territory."

The Izmail district of Odessa [Odesa] region was part of Romania until it was annexed by the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Local Orthodox churches were until then part of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, but the Soviet authorities unilaterally transferred them to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in the wake of the annexation. Since the end of the Communist period, some Orthodox clergy and believers both in Moldova and in parts of Ukraine with ethnic Romanian populations which were once part of Romania have sought to revive the jurisdiction of the Romanian Patriarchate through its Moldovan-based Bessarabian Metropolitanate. However, they have faced obstruction from the authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church in both Moldova and Ukraine.

The Orthodox church in Kamyshovka was destroyed by the Soviet authorities, and the two Orthodox parishes share premises in the village's main administration and communal building, one on the ground floor and the other on the first floor. Fr Curtev told Forum 18 he has about 50 members of his parish, with about 20 at a regular Sunday service.

On 12 March, marked as the Sunday of Orthodoxy, Fr Grecu hit Fr Curtev on the head when they encountered each other in the administration building as each was going to conduct their Sunday liturgy, according to Fr Curtev's parishioners. "There were many witnesses to this from both parishes," Iordachescu told Forum 18. "We went to the police but they wouldn't get involved – they're on the side of the Moscow Patriarchate."

Fr Curtev and his parishioners report that after the Sunday liturgy on 9 April, Fr Curtev was followed by a mob accompanied by Fr Grecu as he travelled back to his home village of Dolinske (Anadol in Romanian). At the train station in Izmail, he was set upon by the mob, threatened with death and sustained physical injuries. Fr Curtev reported the attack to the local police, who took statements both from him and from Fr Grecu. "Grecu didn't admit any guilt of course," Fr Curtev told Forum 18.

Fr Grecu – who was not visible during the attack – admitted to Forum 18 that the police had interviewed him in mid-April about the incident in Izmail. "I told them I was in the town at the time but didn't see the incident. I didn't send the men who attacked him."

Despite his protestations of innocence, Fr Grecu does not hide his hostility, claiming that ninety per cent of the village opposes Fr

Curtev. "Many people came to me and asked what they should do about him," he told Forum 18. "I said if you're not happy with what he does you should decide for yourselves what you should do." Asked why Fr Curtev's activities were his concern given that it is a separate religious community, Fr Grecu repeated his accusations that Fr Curtev represents a "diabolical" community. "They will never be allowed to remain here," he pledged.

Asked why he had the right to claim this given Ukraine's laws guaranteeing religious freedom, Fr Grecu responded: "Freedom of religion is a secular law, but we follow God's law. Democracy means that people just do what they want – it comes from the devil. We're not for democracy – we're Orthodox."

Iordachescu said the parish doubts whether the police will take action to punish those guilty of attacking Fr Curtev and preventing further attacks. "The authorities should defend us," he told Forum 18. Fr Curtev shares his doubts. "The state agencies should defend us but they don't – on the contrary," he told Forum 18. "We don't know why." He said he had outlined the community's complaints in writing to the head of Izmail district administration, Sergei Nikolaev.

Fr Curtev insists he is no Romanian spy as the Russian Orthodox allege. "They say I'm here conducting pro-Romanian propaganda. But all I am here for is to pray." Iordachescu adds that the Bessarabian parish wants to live in peace with the rival congregation. "We should be brothers in Christ," he told Forum 18.

Although Nikolaev said he had not received any complaint from the Bessarabian parish, he was categorical that the authorities will act. "I have only official information about these incidents and our police will investigate," he told Forum 18 from Izmail on 20 April. "Someone will answer before the law for hooliganism. I have also told local officials not to tolerate such attacks."

Nikolaev insisted there is no official hostility to the Bessarabian Church. "Everyone should choose for themselves which faith to belong to," he told Forum 18. "We don't obstruct the development of the Bulgarian, Russian, Romanian or any other jurisdiction. In law they're all equal." He said the authorities have no objection to the opening of new Bessarabian Orthodox parishes.

Iordachescu told Forum 18 that when the parish of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul sought registration the then religious affairs official of Odessa region, Anatoly Senchuk, categorically refused to register it as a parish of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate as it wanted. Senchuk claimed this was impossible as the Bessarabian Metropolitanate was not registered in neighbouring Moldova, although in fact the Moldovan government had been forced to register the Metropolitanate in 2002 after it was found guilty and fined by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (see F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=367).

Iordachescu said the Kamyshovka parish finally gained registration in 2003 as an independent Orthodox parish.

Pyotr Dzis, Odessa region's current religious affairs official, pointedly declined to say whether a registration application from a Bessarabian Orthodox parish would now be processed. "We do everything in accordance with the law – we don't refuse registration to anyone," he told Forum 18 from Odessa on 20 April. Asked specifically whether this included any potential applications from a Bessarabian parish he pointedly avoided answering. He also declined to comment on his predecessor's refusal to register the Kamyshovka parish as a community of the Bessarabian Church. "I've only been here a year. I'm not responsible for what happened before." After declaring that the issue is "not one for a telephone discussion" he then hung up.

Other Bessarabian Orthodox priests have faced official and Russian Orthodox hostility in the far south west of Ukraine. Fr Nicolae Asargiu, a native of Dolinske, was named by the Bessarabian Church as parish priest there in 1996, but was detained and deported in July 1998. The village church was transferred to the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church. Fr Asargiu was given a five-year entry ban to Ukraine (see F18News 30 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=573). Fr Curtev said Fr Asargiu would like to return to serve in his home village, as would many parishioners, but he is too afraid. "He sees what is happening to me. He'll wait till the situation calms down."

Fr Curtev's predecessor in Kamyshovka, Fr Anatol Cristea, was appointed to serve in the parish in 1996 after an invitation from local Romanian-speaking Orthodox. "When the Izmail administration found out I was from the Bessarabian jurisdiction, they were very unfriendly," he told Forum 18 from Gotesti in Moldova on 19 April. "They looked for a reason to expel me, so they accused me of being a Romanian spy – it was a ridiculous claim." He was expelled in July 1997. However, on a return visit to the village in February 2004 his car was attacked and burnt out. "Fr Grecu rounded up a mob of Russian Orthodox who swore at me then set my car on fire."

Iordachescu told Forum 18 that his parish is now the only one regularly served by a Bessarabian priest. He said Romanian-speaking Orthodox in other local villages as well as in the town of Chernivtsi (Cernauti in Romanian) – also in Romania until the Second World War - would like to worship within the Bessarabian Church

Orthodox Christianity is divided in Ukraine into several competing jurisdictions, the largest being the Moscow Patriarchate, followed by the Kiev Patriarchate and the Autocephalous Church. Old Believers, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and other jurisdictions are also registered. Despite the at times vocal opposition of the Moscow Patriarchate, the authorities have not generally

prevented specific jurisdictions from registering apart from the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, though officials crushed a budding parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in autumn 2005 (see F18News 4 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=666).

Ukrainian priests of the Russian Orthodox Church have also on occasion used violence against members of other faiths. The local press has reported that in April 2005, Fr Aleksandr Gladchenko – angered by a group of about 40 Jehovah's Witnesses preaching in the village of Bereznyaki in Cherkasy region in Orthodox Holy Week - allegedly assaulted them with a stick while shouting "Out Satan!" The Witnesses requested criminal charges under hate crime laws, and the matter has been before the courts with 20 separate hearings so far.

Fr Gladchenko remains adamant that he would do the same thing again. "What sort of shepherd would I be if wolves grabbed my flock and I looked upon this with indifference?" he told the press. "I am obliged to defend them. We are all warriors for Christ, warriors for the Church and our Motherland." (END)

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.

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