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LGBT+ group sues Ukraine religious figure linking coronavirus to gay marriage

Orthodox Patriarch Filaret faces legal action after blaming emergence of COVID-19 on LGBT+ unions.

By Umberto Bacchi and Maria Georgieva

Thomson Reuters Foundation (13.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3cAkeQ0> – A Ukrainian LGBT+ group said on Monday it has sued one of the country's most prominent religious figures over comments blaming the spread of the

coronavirus on same-sex marriage, in what the group said was the first such case in ex-Soviet nation.

Kiev-based group Insight said it took legal action against Patriarch Filaret, who heads one of Ukraine's largest Orthodox congregations, over remarks made during a TV interview that rights activists said risked fuelling hatred and discrimination.

Filaret is a renowned figure in the country, having led a split of the Ukrainian church from its Russian parent which had him defrocked and excommunicated.

"Our aim is to show people that there is no longer place for such statements from church leaders in Ukraine," Insight's head Olena Shevchenko told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Since the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in China in December 2019, several religious figures across the world have suggested the emergence of the virus was divine retribution for same-sex activity, which they see as sinful.

Filaret added his voice in March, telling Ukrainian national TV network Channel 4 that the epidemic was "God's punishment for the sins of men, the sinfulness of humanity".

"First of all, I mean same-sex marriage," said Filaret, head of the Kiev Patriarchate that says it currently has more than 15 million followers among Ukraine's 42 million people.

Rights groups described the comments as “dangerous” saying they risked stirring violence at a time where the health crisis was already stoking tensions and anxieties.

“Such statements ... are very harmful because they could lead to increased attacks, aggression, discrimination and acceptance of violence against certain groups,” said Maria Guryeva, a spokeswoman for Amnesty International Ukraine.

In February, fearing possible contagion, residents of a central Ukrainian town clashed with police and hurled projectiles at a convoy of buses carrying evacuees from China headed to a local sanatorium for quarantine.

The Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate did not reply to a request for comment on Monday.

Responding to reports about a possible lawsuit in March, the Patriarchate said Filaret’s remarks were consistent with Ukrainian laws.

“As the head of the church and as a man, the Patriarch has the freedom to express his views, which are based on morality,” the Patriarchate’s press service said in a statement.

The Patriarchate reserved the right to bring counterclaims against those who sought to abuse judicial protections to

encroach on Ukraine's traditional family values, it added.

The administrative proceeding filed in a Kiev court sought to obtain an apology for disseminating false information and a rectification from the Patriarch and the TV channel that aired the interview, said Shevchenko of Insight.

"We just want them to be more responsible the next time," she said by phone.

While the government has increased support for LGBT rights in recent years, same-sex unions are not legally recognised in Ukraine and activists say homophobia remains widespread.

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