

UKRAINE: Russia moves to crush Orthodox Church of Ukraine in occupied Crimea

By Halya Coynash

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (14.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2EiC46n> – The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has been ordered to vacate the Cathedral of Vladimir and Olga in occupied Simferopol by the beginning of March, with this likely to lead to eight parishes in rural areas also being forced to close. Archbishop Kliment of Simferopol and Crimea has appealed to the international community to prevent the effective destruction of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] which has long been under attack in Crimea. He has also, however, suggested that if there was a choice between the Church being able to continue and a fully principled stand refusing to register under Russian legislation, he chooses the Church.

Kliment reported on 8 February that he had received a writ ordering that he leave the Cathedral which was now under the so-called ministry of property and land relations. The occupation authorities were thus terminating the agreement between the Church and the Crimean Property Fund in 2002, and the Church was given 30 days to vacate the building.

Perhaps coincidentally, on 5 February Kliment was appointed the head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's Mission to help victims of rights abuses and illegal imprisonment in Russia

and occupied territories.

During a press conference in Kyiv on 12 February, Kliment called on the international community, on the ambassadors of European countries, the USA and Canada in Ukraine to take the situation under their personal control. If pressure on the Church intensifies, he said, personal sanctions were crucial against those involved in terminating the Church's lease agreement.

The following day, Anna Anyukhina from the occupation 'government' claimed that they had offered to 'legalize relations', that the Church had not re-registered as a legal entity, under Russian legislation, and that they therefore did not have such a possibility.

The Church has, indeed, refused to re-register under Russian legislation, which would require adding words to its association papers claiming that Crimea is part of Russia. Lack of such registration has meant that the Church is not considered to be a legal entity at all.

As mentioned, Kliment addressed this question in an interview to Krym.Realii on 13 February, saying the following:

"You know, when the principled position of the Ukrainian government is that "we won't accept anything from Crimea" and they reject all responsibility for what is happening in Crimea, I don't know what I should do now, and how. If there is a choice between the Church, religious services and people

(and the stand on registration), then I choose the Church”.

This is not the first time that the Archbishop has expressed bitterness that the Ukrainian government is not doing enough to support his Church under siege in occupied Crimea.

It is, in fact, not guaranteed that the occupation regime would not have used other methods to hound out the Church and Kliment has said that he was offered a large amount of money very early on if he vacated the Cathedral.

It was Kliment and the Church that first came under attack following annexation, almost certainly because of its openly pro-Ukrainian position and its public statement on 11 March 2014 condemning Russian occupation of Crimea. It was this opposition that led to its refusal to enter into any agreement with the Russian Defence Ministry (over church premises in Sevastopol ‘handed over’ to that ministry or to re-register under Russian legislation. There has, however, been an attack on all things Ukrainian since Russia’s invasion, and the Church has provided a vital focal point for people wanting to hear Ukrainian and be with Ukrainians. That alone, as well as Kliment’s impassioned appeals to the international community in defence of Ukrainian political prisoners, were surely behind the attempts to deprive the Church and believers of their places of worship and of other rights. Other methods included the threat of physical reprisals by the armed paramilitaries, especially in 2014, vulnerability over the lack of Russian citizenship and also economic intimidation. There have been threats, for example, against those businesspeople who provided premises for the Church to use, with this a reason why many religious communities have lost their places of worship.

During the first year after Russia's invasion, 38 out of the 46 parishes under what was then still the Kyiv Patriarchate ceased to exist. In at least three cases, churches were seized by the occupation regime: in Sevastopol; Simferopol and in the village of Perevalne.

At a press conference in October 2018, Kliment reported that only five priests now remained against 25 in 2014. Five had left recently for mainland Ukraine after a number of searches of the homes of members of the Ukrainian Cultural Centre and after it became clear that the lack of a Russian passport was likely to be used against them. The remaining clergy try as far as is possible to continue services, sometimes helped by priests who come for one or two days from mainland Ukraine.

While the Cathedral is not the only remaining church in Crimea, it is the main cathedral and eparchial centre of the Church. It is also the only Ukrainian Orthodox place of worship in Simferopol and for many believers, it would simply not be possible to travel to other parts of the peninsula for services.

The new moves to drive the Church out of Crimea are probably also retaliation for the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine with autocephaly or independent status. The developments were met with rage by both the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate and Archbishop Kliment had anticipated measures against the Church in Crimea as revenge. He had earlier spoken of how Sergei Aksyonov, the Russian-installed 'leader' of Crimea that the occupation regime's restraint was due to a request from Metropolitan Lazar, head of the Russian

Orthodox Church in Crimea who was worried that persecution of the Ukrainian Church in Crimea could lead to a backlash against churches of the Moscow Patriarchate in mainland Ukraine. After Ukraine receives the Tomos of autocephaly on January 6, 2019, there is nothing and nobody, Kliment said, save God, who can restrain the Russian authorities in occupied Crimea.

Tragically, he was right.

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UKRAINE: Ukrainian Orthodox Christians formally break

from Russia

By Carlotta Gall

New York Times (06.01.2019) – <https://nyti.ms/2RziB8R> – ISTANBUL – The spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide recognized the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in a four-hour ceremony in Istanbul on Sunday, formalizing a split with the Russian church to which it had been tied for more than four centuries.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader, handed a Tomos of Autocephaly containing a decree of independence to the newly appointed Metropolitan Epiphanius of Ukraine, cleaving millions of Ukrainians from the Russian Orthodox Church.

The independence effort outraged political and religious leaders in Russia. But for President Petro O. Poroshenko of Ukraine, who stood before an elevated throne throughout the ceremony in Istanbul, the occasion was an affirmation of independence from Russian influence in his embattled country and a boost ahead of elections in March.

“Tomos for us is actually another act of proclaiming Ukraine’s independence,” Mr. Poroshenko said in an address. “For Ukrainians, our own Church is a guarantee of our spiritual freedom. This is the key to social harmony.”

Recognition of the church’s autonomy will resolve a problem for the many Ukrainians who had broken with Moscow and been

declared noncanonical, he added.

The Ukrainian church had been under Moscow's jurisdiction since 1686, when, under pressure from Russia, it abandoned allegiance to Constantinople, the historical seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church now known as Istanbul.

With that longstanding relationship threatened by tensions between Russian and Ukraine, Mr. Poroshenko, as well as nearly 200 bishops and other church figures, gathered in December in St. Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, to choose the head of the future autonomous Ukrainian church. That decision sealed the country's intention to sever religious ties from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moscow patriarch, Kirill I.

"I support separating from the Russian church," said Dmytro Khanenko, 20, a Ukrainian student who was following the ceremony on Sunday, "but I don't like how politics is involved."

Politicians were using the issue to gain popularity, he said. "The fact that Ukraine is in conflict with Russia means it is good to show that Ukraine is less dependent on Russia," he said.

The Moscow patriarch claims to have oversight not only of Orthodox communities in Russia but also most of the areas of the former Soviet Union, but it has been struggling to maintain its hold over what his church views as a wayward

province ever since Ukraine declared independence in 1991.

Patriarch Kirill oversees the world's largest community of Orthodox Christians, some 150 million faithful – half of the number of Orthodox Christians worldwide. The loss of Ukraine's Orthodox faithful would shrink the number of parishes under Moscow's control by a third.

Patriarch Bartholomew now oversees 15 separate Orthodox Churches from his seat in Istanbul, the ancient cradle of Christendom that the Orthodox still call Constantinople.

He had signed the Tomos in a civil ceremony with Mr. Poroshenko on Saturday, and sanctified it in a Mass on Sunday. The ceremony began before dawn, with priests chanting hymns under a single chandelier in St. George's Cathedral.

The Cathedral was flooded with light as the patriarch blessed the new Metropolitan, dressed in blue, white and gold vestments and a glittering miter. As he was handed the Tomos, bells pealed and the congregation broke into applause.

Hundreds of faithful filled the side aisles and galleries above, including many from the dwindling Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul. The Ukrainian delegation included cabinet members and the speaker of Parliament.

Both Patriarch Bartholomew and the new autonomous Ukrainian church described the occasion not as a schism but as a long-

needed alignment of Ukraine's independent state and church.

The patriarch called on the new metropolitan not to exclude any believers from his church, including those loyal to Moscow, and urged him to build bridges and unite the people, said an official from the patriarchate, who spoke on the condition of anonymity in keeping with protocol.

"The Orthodox Church had 14 independent churches, and today it has 15," said Nikolas Papachristou, a spokesman for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. "Together they create our Orthodox Church."

Church and national leaders in Ukraine had been pressing for self-governance for the church for 30 years, since Ukraine became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Metropolitan Epiphanius said in a speech during the ceremony.

"With the support of the Ukrainian state and our president, the separation has been eliminated, and the unity has been restored."

The Tomos, read out during the signing ceremony on Saturday, declares that the Metropolitan of Kiev and all Ukraine, representing the Holy Synod of Ukrainian bishops, should turn to the Patriarchate of Constantinople for all decisions in the future.

"In this way, the affairs of the church in this country will

be governed, as proclaimed by the divine and holy canon, freely and in the Holy Spirit, without hindrance, without any other external influence," it said.

Mr. Poroshenko, the Ukrainian leader, expressed his appreciation on Twitter. "Thank you to the millions of Ukrainians around the world who prayed for the establishment of the Single Local Orthodox Church," he wrote. "Thank you to the generation of Ukrainians who dreamed about this day."

Part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that remains loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate declared that the Tomos for the new church of Ukraine had been signed in violation of canonical rules, the Russian news agency Tass reported.

The agency quoted Archbishop Clement, head of the information and education department of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as saying that Patriarch Bartholomew was veering into factionalism by supporting the schism.

Much of the Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on Monday, when a celebration will be held in St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and the Tomos will go on display to the public.

There has been concern that the schism dividing the Ukrainian and Russian churches could provoke violent clashes over church property, not least the famous monastery in central Kiev revered as the birthplace of Russian Christianity. President Vladimir V. Putin himself warned of that possibility last month.

Local Orthodox Christians attending the Mass on Sunday were barely aware of Ukraine's historical event and gathered after for an annual baptismal ceremony for the Epiphany on the shores of the Golden Horn, an inlet of the Bosphorus in Istanbul.

Dimitri, 32, who was born and raised in Istanbul but who did not want his last name published because of religious discrimination in Turkey, said "We are here to bless the water, especially for the fishermen."

"The split of the Ukranian church doesn't mean much to us, because we all believe in the same things," he said. "But we support the split, as far as we've followed it from the news. We don't think there is bad intention underneath. Jesus said God is one, it applies to this situation, too."

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