

## ***Ukrainian Church Faces Obscure Pro-Russia Revolt in Its Own Ranks***

By **Andrew Higgins**

June 21, 2014

LVIV, Ukraine — In a zealously nationalist region of Ukraine that clamors to join Europe and bubbles with suspicion toward Russia, Father Andriy, a preacher at Our Lady of Everlasting Succor church, was defiantly out of step with the mood of his flock.

The European Union, he explained after a Sunday service, is an “empire of evil” committed to defying the word of God and to spreading homosexuality and pedophilia. As for antigovernment protesters who toppled President Viktor F. Yanukovich and are praised as heroes in this western corner of Ukraine, the priest sees only “Godless deviants” and “fools” who are “in the pay of hostile foreign powers.”

Such views, espoused by a small but noisy group of fundamentalist Catholic clerics in western Ukraine, are commonplace among the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Ukrainian affiliate, whose Moscow-based patriarch is a firm ally of President Vladimir V. Putin.

But they are remote from the traditional leanings of what is by far the largest religious denomination in western Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. So much so, in fact, that many here suspect a Russian-backed maneuver to destroy a vital wellspring of Ukrainian nationalism.

“It is all fake, a political manipulation,” said Ihor Vrozhnyak, the archbishop of Lviv for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the main target of attack for a cabal of aggressively pro-Russian dissident clerics. “They try to scare people by saying we will all go to hell,” he added, in an interview in his chambers at St. George’s Cathedral.

Even before mysterious pro-Russian gunmen began hacking away at Ukraine’s sovereignty in the Crimea and now in eastern Ukraine, a well-planned and curiously well-funded assault was already underway in the west of the country on the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, an institution that has sustained Ukraine spiritually for generations and helped keep alive belief in the possibility of a separate, independent Ukrainian state.

Forced underground during the years of the Soviet Union, when its property was confiscated and transferred to the Moscow Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was allowed to resurface by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s and, continuing its traditional role as a bastion of resistance to domination by Russia, helped rally support for the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state in 1991.

In recent years, however, it has confronted an obscure pro-Moscow revolt from within its own ranks. Claiming to represent the church’s true spiritual purpose, a clutch of fundamentalist priests with political views closely aligned to those of Russia formed its own rival hierarchy and recruited people like Father Andriy, a former factory worker, to spread their message about Europe’s satanic ills.

The political underpinnings of what had initially seemed a theological quarrel came into clear focus late last year when protests erupted in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, after a decision by the then-president, Mr. Yanukovich, to spurn a wide-ranging trade and political accord with the European Union.

The breakaway church — which calls itself the Ukrainian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church — issued an appeal to Mr. Putin in December to intervene militarily to restore order and defeat what it scorned as “Euro-sodomitic occupation by Brussels programmed by U.S. agents.”

Religion has played an important role in Ukraine's political tumult, with rival church hierarchies lining up on opposing sides of the barricades. A longstanding split within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the country's biggest, led its Kyivan Patriarchate to support protesters while its Moscow Patriarchate denounced protesters as extremists and hooligans intent on stealing its relics.

But the rift in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, an institution that recognizes the authority of the Vatican but follows rituals known as Eastern Rites, added a murky new dimension to Ukraine's clerical feuds and threatened division in a part of the country previously known for its nationalist unity.

As with other fundamentalist groups that have split from long-established churches like the Anglican Church in Britain and the Episcopal Church in the United States, the breakaway Ukrainian outfit is obsessed with homosexuality and with preventing any tolerance of what it views as a grave sin. But theological issues, its critics say, mask a geopolitical agenda that puts it firmly on the side of Russia in opposition to Ukraine's drawing closer to the Europe.

When the Roman Catholic archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles J. Chaput, issued a statement in January voicing sympathy for pro-Europe protesters in Kiev and expressing alarm that Ukraine had "shifted back toward the Russian orbit," the breakaway Ukrainian church responded with venom. It denounced him as a heretic and, echoing Russian propaganda, dismissed the protesters as "foreign terrorists" and said their demands for human rights "are in fact nothing else than the promotion of homosexual perversion."

In April, amid rising tensions in eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian separatists have seized government buildings in at least 10 towns, the breakaway church issued a "pastoral letter" ahead of Easter that made no reference to the unrest stirred by Russia's supporters but called instead on "brave individuals" to resist the "negative fruits" of the pro-European protests that ousted Mr. Yanukovich. "The only way for Ukraine to be saved is true repentance!" the letter said. "It must call homosexuality a sin! It must condemn the suicidal system founded on the ideology of homosexuality."

Headed by a 67-year-old fundamentalist preacher from the Czech Republic, Antonin Dohnal, the sect began a decade ago as a dissident movement within the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

After repeated clashes over theology, property and politics, though, Mr. Dohnal and his followers broke away in 2009 to form their own "orthodox" version of the mainstream church. It appointed its own bishops and priests and in 2011 broke with the Vatican, too, establishing its own Byzantine Catholic Patriarchate based in Lviv and headed by Mr. Dohnal, who as a Czech national has now gone into hiding to avoid expulsion from Ukraine for visa violations. While never attracting a large number of followers, Mr. Dohnal and his lieutenants made headlines in the local news media for their pro-Russian views and their alleged brainwashing of vulnerable young recruits.

Ekspres, a Lviv-based newspaper that conducted a lengthy investigation of the church, reported that it had discovered an important clue to the group's pro-Moscow allegiances: Before the 1989 collapse of Communism in his homeland, then still Czechoslovakia, Mr. Dohnal worked as an informer for Soviet intelligence. The newspaper published what it said was a document from former Czechoslovak archives that identified him as a mole for Soviet intelligence with the code name "Tonek."

The breakaway church did not respond to interview requests made by telephone and email, and in recent weeks has mostly fallen silent as tensions in the country have risen, along with fears of a Russian invasion. At its headquarters in Brykovich, a village outside Lviv, a bearded priest in a black robe shooed away visitors, insisting that he did not know the whereabouts of Mr. Dohnal and that nobody else was available to comment.

On its website, however, the sect had responded to suspicions of ties to the Russian secret services by posting what it said was a letter from the Czech Interior Ministry's Security Committee certifying that there was no record of any past link to secret services by Mr. Dohnal.

The letter, however, has not dented a widespread conviction among Ukrainians familiar with Mr. Dohnal's work that his mission goes far beyond theology, especially as nobody can figure out how a small sect with no obvious source of income can maintain an elaborate website in six different languages and a wide range of properties in Lviv and elsewhere.

Myroslav Marynovych, vice rector of the Lviv-based Ukrainian Catholic University, said he had no doubt that “Russian money and Russian logic” were driving the breakaway sect, whose message is so out of tune with public opinion in western Ukraine and so in sync with the views of Moscow. “They are zombies who see only one danger — the West as an incarnation of evil,” said Mr. Marynovych.

The breakaway church has spent much of its energy pronouncing “anathemas” — a form of excommunication — against its perceived enemies. These include Pope Francis and his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, the leaders of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and also President Obama. Mr. Obama, according to the sect, has become “an instrument for the Antichrist” through his “active promotion of homosexuality, abortions and demoralization.”

“They are against everyone, including me,” said Archbishop Vrozhnyak. “It seems that their only objective is to create disorder inside the church.”

Father Andriy, who declined to give his last name because he did not have permission to give it, dismissed suspicions of a Russian hand, saying this was a smear invented by sinners who wanted to undermine the appeal of the breakaway church. “This is God’s project, not Russia’s,” he said, adding that anyone who disagreed with the pro-Europe line of the protesters who toppled Mr. Yanukovich “is accused of working for Russian special services.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 22, 2014, Section A, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Ukrainian Church Faces a Small Pro-Russia Revolt

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