

Chronicle

Russian Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Slovakia

On 12 May 1989 the Bratislava daily *Pravda* published an article entitled 'Willingness to Solve the Problems'. It reported that

On 11 May deputy minister Vincent Mačovský, director of the Slovak Secretariat for Church Affairs, attended a meeting between representatives of the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches, Msg. Ján Hirka and the Orthodox archbishop of Prešov, Nikolaj. The representatives of both churches informed one another of the religious situation in eastern Slovakia and agreed upon the need to solve the continuing problems between the two churches in sharing church premises. Party people present expressed their willingness to see the problems resolved and set a date in early June for a further meeting. Both sides undertook to encourage their members to religious and civil tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

At first glance then it appears that the government wishes to put an end to 21 years of disagreement between the 30,000 Orthodox in Czechoslovakia, headed by an archbishop, and the Greek-Catholic Church which, although ten times larger than the Orthodox Church, does not have even a bishop. The Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches in Czechoslovakia share property and church

premises. Although supervised by state bodies this arrangement regularly gives rise to outbreaks of trouble.

For example, on 23 April 1989 in the village of Slovinky, Spišská Nová Ves district, a communal meal was to be held in the parish premises used by the Greek-Catholic Church. The local Orthodox priest, after a telephone conversation with the regional church secretary, Sičák, occupied the parish building with some of his congregation and prevented the Greek-Catholic priest, a curate and a Roman Catholic priest who had been invited from entering. The Orthodox had even called on the police for assistance, suggesting that they expected violence from the Greek-Catholics. Violence that they, however, had no right to provoke.

After Easter 1988 the head of the Orthodox bishops' conference in Prešov, Belejkanič, ordered the caretaker to change the lock on the cathedral doors, which the Greek-Catholics had been using as an emergency exit since 1968. This made it impossible to clean the cathedral and provide first aid to believers. The Greek-Catholics referred the matter to the authorities. Meetings were held for a whole year at the District People's Committee in Prešov, Regional People's Committee in Košice and Ministry of Culture in Bratis-

lava, but to no avail. And all because of one lock! Finally in April 1989 a safety inspector in Košice decided the matter by declaring that all rooms used for public gatherings must have emergency exits. The Orthodox Church then closed the debate by walling up the doors.

Until 1950 the Prešov cathedral and nearby bishop's residence belonged to the Greek-Catholics. After the Greek-Catholic Church was banned, the cathedral came under Orthodox ownership. The Orthodox still own the buildings, but the Greek-Catholics are able to use them for their services. Only the Orthodox Church has a bishop's residence.

In Bardějov, where the church is used by Orthodox and Greek-Catholics, the Orthodox priest Lakata has on several occasions arrived at the church accompanied by lay people during Greek-Catholic services, and demanded access to the altar and that the service in progress stop — even though both churches have clearly defined times of use! After every Orthodox service the Greek-Catholics found altar cloths and flowers strewn around.

Jakubany in Stará Lúbovňa is a Greek-Catholic village without a single Orthodox believer. Yet the Orthodox deacon of Prešov, Humeník, requested access to the church in order to hold Easter services according to the Julian calendar. Greek-Catholic believers blocked his way to prevent him driving into the village. Humeník drove into the crowd for a few hundred metres, knocking down and injuring a woman. The people of Jakubany reported this incident to the authorities. The district bodies recognised that Humeník's action was illegal as he had wished to hold

religious services in another parish without a licence to do so. However, the District People's Assembly and Ministry of Culture accused the Greek-Catholics of religious intolerance. If a Greek-Catholic or Roman Catholic priest had done what this Orthodox priest did, he would have ended up in gaol.

Similar actions by undercover opponents of the Greek-Catholic Church have also been organised in other villages in eastern Slovakia, e.g. Livovska Huta, Šarišsky Jastrabí and Litmanova and Šumiáci.

As the supreme provocation, however, we must consider an announcement made by the director of the Slovak Secretariat for Church Affairs, Vincent Mačovský, at a meeting of the Slovak ordinaries at the Cyril Methodius faculty in Bratislava:

Until the Greek-Catholic Church meets all the requirements of the Orthodox Church it will be unable to realise its own needs and will not have its own bishop.

These words allow us to guess whose side the authorities are on. The forces which 39 years ago caused the Greek-Catholic Church to be joined forcibly to the Orthodox and brought under the authority of the Moscow patriarch are still strong and active in Bratislava and eastern Slovakia. Representatives of the Orthodox Church in Slovakia, assuming they are not working for any other agencies but simply as pastors, should distance themselves from these provocative acts because they sully the Orthodox Church and religion in general.

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Voice of America radio broadcast,
24 June 1989