

Rukh MPs challenge 'Russian' church

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From Susan Viets
in Kiev

THE Ukraine's religious cold war heated up yesterday when Mykhailo Horyn, the new political head of the pro-independence movement Rukh, stepped out of the congress which elected him to lie across the road leading to St Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev.

Mr Horyn and a Rukh MP, Oles Shevchenko, were trying to block the path of a large black Chaika carrying Patriarch Alexei, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Alexei had travelled from Moscow to give a service in St Sophia's, one of Kiev's oldest orthodox churches, which until recently was a museum.

Last weekend the rival Patriarch Mstyslav, head of the independent Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, returned to Kiev after 46 years' exile in North America to preach in St Sophia's and claim it as the seat for his church.

Mr Horyn and Mr Shevchenko failed in their protest, as did about 1,000 Autocephalous Orthodox believers who tried to seal off the square by forming a human chain and a barricade of vehicles. Plain clothes security men dragged the protesters off the pavement, roughed them up and the Chaika moved on to the cathedral doors. Security, said another Rukh MP, Volodymyr Kryzhanivski, was controlled from Moscow.

A group of Rukh MPs led by the Kiev deputy police chief was refused entry to the service, which will be broadcast on Soviet television.

A Rukh statement yesterday said Patriarch Alexei was sent to Kiev over the heads of the city and the public authorities. Rukh described his visit as "a spiritual assault on Ukraine from Moscow".

Thousands of Russian Orthodox believers, pushing and shoving to break through the Autocephalous cordon, testified to a complex and volatile religious problem in the republic.

In the heavily Russified east, the Russian Orthodox Church has taken root since Russification by the Tsars in the nineteenth century followed by Stalin's repression of the Autocephalous church in 1930. Most of the priests perished in the gulag. But the church, traditionally based in the more radical western Ukraine, has experienced a revival since it was allowed to register last year.

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