

# Virgin Mary and the Border: Identity Politics of the Greek Catholic Church at the Ukrainian/Slovak Borderland

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**Virgin Mary and the Border: Identity Politics of the Greek Catholic Church at the Ukrainian/Slovak Borderland.** The article analyses two apparitions of the Virgin Mary that presently take place on the two sides of the Ukrainian/Slovak border, within the context of church-state relations. In both cases the visionaries are members of the Greek Catholic Church and the authorities of this church have the main say in negotiations over the validity of the visionaries' experiences and over the status of pilgrimage sites that presently emerge. Although until the end of the World War II the territory, on which the apparitions take place, was under jurisdiction of one church administrative unit (Mukachevo Eparchy), at present they happen in two different states and come under jurisdiction of two different Greek Catholic bishops. The article argues that different organisation of church-state relations, especially in their financial aspect, is an important, if not decisive, factor accounting for difference in church hierarchy's treatment of the apparitions on the two sites of the border. *Sociológia* 2008, Vol. 40 (No. 6: 548-565)

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On the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2002 two girls, 9 years old Marianka Kobal and 10 years old Olenka Kuruc went to fetch water from a spring called Dzhublyk, located between two villages, Nizhne Bolotne and Vilkhivka in the Transcarpathian Ukraine (*Zakarpatská oblasť*). At the spring they saw a young, beautiful woman standing on a cloud hanging low above the ground and covered with flowers. The woman, dressed in bright white clothes with a blue belt, did not speak but smiled at the girls. The girls, a little scared, returned to their homes and told their parents about their meeting. Fr. Petro, a father of Marianka and a Greek Catholic priest instructed the girls, if they see the woman again, to ask for her name and to make a sign of a cross. The girls saw the woman again the same day later in the afternoon and she identified herself as the Virgin Mary, who had come to help<sup>2</sup>.

Three weeks later, on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2002 Virgin Mary appeared to a nun from an order of St Basilus on a little meadow in the forest in the region of Zemplin in Eastern Slovakia<sup>3</sup>. This was not the first time when the nun had seen the Virgin Mary or talked to her, but this was the first apparition in this particular

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<sup>2</sup> This description is based on the leaflets distributed at the apparition site, and also on the words of the visionaries themselves (Istoriya... 2006).

<sup>3</sup> As this apparition is neither accepted nor even tolerated by the current hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Slovakia, I give neither the name of the visionary nor the name of the place to avoid potential misuse of my material.

place and on this day the visionary received permission from the Virgin Mary to share her experience and invite people for common prayer<sup>4</sup>.

Those two apparition sites are located on the two sides of the Ukrainian/Slovak border, approximately 150 km from one another and they are by no means the only ones either in Slovakia or in the Ukraine. Virgin Mary appears in this region quite often, as she does in other parts of Eastern and Central Europe and throughout the world (Perry – Echeverria 1998; Matter 2001; Zimdars-Swartz 1991). Tatiana Podolinská and her colleagues have compiled a list of over 100 Marian apparitions in Slovakia that have taken place in recent years<sup>5</sup>. Still, although Virgin Mary seems to be a frequent guest among her Eastern European worshippers, few apparition experiences have become known beyond the immediate vicinity of the visionaries and even fewer locations of apparitions have grown into the centres of pilgrimage and mass prayer. Mostly they remain literally what they are officially called by the Catholic Church – private apparitions and private revelations, enjoyed by the selected ones in the privacy of their homes.

Nevertheless, some apparition sites do develop into the sites of pilgrimage and prayer. I see this article as a beginning of the longer research journey, which would hopefully bring us closer towards understanding the ways in which new religious centres develop and survive. Why and how has Medjugorje in Bosnia become a successful apparition? Why people have stopped to attend the above mentioned Slovakian site? How and why has Litmanová (an apparition site in Spiš region in northern Slovakia) changed during the last 15 years? In such an endeavour many various aspects of the given situation have to be taken into consideration: church and lay politics; social networks; national ideologies and their relations to religious identities; needs and expectations of the pilgrims and local believers; features of the place and its transformations from secular into the sacred site; media; societal changes.

As in a short article one cannot follow up all above stated aspects, I have chosen to follow a statement by William Christian Jr., who writes in the context of Marian apparitions: “Whether one regards the messages and symbolism of these visions as sent from God, or as a kind of reflection of the collective unconscious, they provide a fascinating counterpoint to political and social history” (Christian 1984: 240). The apparitions of Virgin Mary and other holy figures can be and are analysed from various standpoints: sociological, political, experiential, feminist or psychoanalytical. Still, in this article I look at the apparitions of the Virgin Mary as gates giving a focused access to issues of social and political history of religion

<sup>4</sup> The description of Slovakian events is based on the conversations with the visionary and her followers. Publications concerning the apparition appeared in a magazine *MROsa* available at [www.magnificat.sk](http://www.magnificat.sk)

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, June 2007.

in the particular setting. I focus on the political aspects of the apparition sites without claiming that the political conflicts preceding and centring on the sites fully explain their emergence, subsequent growth or collapse. Still, I do claim that church politics and in particular the relations between church and the state have crucial influence on the development (or decline) of the apparition sites. In this way I follow a path paved for the “apparitions’ research” by Mart Bax in his influential analysis of the Medjugorje apparition site in Bosnia, who partly analyses the growth of this apparition site as an outcome of the conflict between diocesan and monastic regimes within the church structures in the context of the position of those regimes within the changing political situation in the region (Bax 1995). Here, I look at the politics of the respective churches in Slovakia and Ukraine in order to elucidate the development of the contemporary apparition sites located on the territories under their administration.

### **Greek Catholic Church (GCC)<sup>6</sup> in Ukraine and Slovakia**

Greek Catholic Church in Eastern Europe was established as an outcome of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries’ union agreements<sup>7</sup> between the Vatican and part of local Orthodox priests and bishops. In short, those agreements stated that although administratively and doctrinally those Orthodox priests who sign the union come under the jurisdiction of Rome, they keep the Byzantine liturgical rite. However, from the perspective of the two dominant churches of the region, i.e. the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox, the Greek Catholic Church remained for centuries in what can be called a “neither nor position”. For the Orthodox Church they were the “traitors”, who, as Vasilii Maksimishinec, a head of an important Orthodox monastery in Transcarpathia wrote in 2004 “...sold themselves for Judas’s money and for Rome’s promises...” (2004: 58). The local representatives of the Roman Catholic Church also treated the Greek Catholic with suspicion, as those who could always potentially return to Orthodoxy. For centuries the GCC priests and believers were encouraged to adopt Latin devotional practices, architectural styles as well as liturgical changes to render their historical connections to Orthodoxy less visible. (Mahieu 2008; Hann 2003; Buzalka 2007).

The two apparition sites introduced above are located on a territory that until the II World War and officially even longer (Vasil’ n.d.) belonged to one Greek Catholic eparchy of Mukachevo. After the Second World War the situation of the Greek Catholic Church was especially precarious and although all church institutions suffered some prosecution under communist regimes, the socialist

states added its own suspicions to the ones that had been voiced by RCC and Orthodox Church for centuries, especially in the countries with relatively big population of Orthodox believers. Although in all the countries of the region the operation of the GCC was either severely restricted or straightforwardly forbidden, there were also significant differences.

In socialist Slovakia the GCC ceased to exist legally as an outcome of the so-called “Prešov pseudo-council” of Greek Catholic bishops that declared the unions with Vatican illegitimate (Moravčíková 2003). The property of the GCC was transferred to Orthodox Church or to the socialist state and many of those Greek Catholic priests and bishops who did not want to serve in the Orthodox Church were imprisoned or murdered. Others continued to serve underground, and yet others lived as laymen. The Greek Catholic Church was re-established officially in Slovakia in 1968. Still, it remained in weak position until the end of the communist regime – many church building remained under control of the Orthodox Church until 1989 and the number of consecrated priests remained under the level of demand (Moravčíková 2003). The situation of the GCC church changed only after the 1989 and the reforms continued after separation of Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993. The questions of church property (especially important in Orthodox Church – GCC relations) were solved relatively smoothly (especially in comparison to the Ukraine) and the state provided substantial support for building new churches. The conflicts taking place in the mid-1990s have been mostly solved and the final agreement with regard to property issues between the Slovak government, GCC and the Orthodox Church was signed on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 2000 (Moravčíková 2003). The results of this process could be seen in Slovak villages – many of them have several new churches for various denominations, mostly built with state support.

In Soviet Ukraine the Greek Catholic Church was “reunited” with Orthodox Church in 1946. Although the Soviet state persecuted all religious groups, it was the GCC that suffered most (Naumescu 2008). Bishops and priests were imprisoned, exiled, murdered, while others operated underground. This situation lasted much longer than in Slovakia – the Greek Catholic Church reappeared from the “catacombs” only in the late 1980s. Still, although in the Ukraine the question of religion was after the collapse of the Soviet block very present on the political scene and various political options still tend to identify themselves or seek support in this or that church institution (Naumescu 2008), the state actual involvement in solving the property questions and financial situation of the churches after 1991 has been minimal. In Transcarpathia for example, there are still many unresolved issues regarding ownership of church buildings, the fact that is related to a particular arrangement of church-state relations, especially with regard to the financial aspects.

<sup>6</sup> In the rest of the article I use the abbreviation GCC for Greek Catholic Church and RCC for Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>7</sup> The most important union agreements were signed in 1596 in Brest and in 1646 in Uzhgorod.

After collapse of the Soviet bloc, Ukraine and Slovakia have followed two very different paths with regards to financing church institutions, although both countries are officially secular states. In the Ukraine the only financial obligation of the state towards the churches is assistance with retribution of property confiscated during the Soviet regime, but in general the state does not support financially those religious communities that loose the property-related arguments. According to the 1991 law "On freedom of consciousness and religious organisations" Ukraine follows in principle non-institutionalised model of religious life (Jelenski 2003). In practice this looks as follows: if for example in a village there is at least 10 people who would like to form religious community, they have to register it with the state organs. Separately, they make a request to the church institution of their choice for recognition and usually for providing a priest. The state has no financial obligations to such a community – the believers have to finance the priests themselves, they are responsible for maintaining or erecting church buildings. The details of financing depend on the internal politics and financial situation of the given church – for example in the case of GCC the communities collect funds also for supporting the GCC headquarters. In general, the state is not involved in financing church institutions in any way and for most churches the contributions from parishes form a crucial source of income.

In Slovakia the situation is very different, as there the state supports directly the churches and religious organisations (Mulík 1997, Jozefčiaková 2003). The amount of support is based on negotiations with the churches' representatives and realized through the Ministry of Culture. All priests receive salary from the state, according to an official table (see Gradoš 2004 for detailed numbers). Financial disbursement can be also seen as a means to control church activities. For example, all church-related youth organizations can receive financial support for their activities (summer camps, pilgrimages, concerts, exhibitions and so on) if they register within a centralized on-line system.<sup>8</sup> Hence, although there is no formal obligation to inform state authorities about church-related activities, there is a clear financial incentive to do so. What is most important for the present argument however is that the basic financial needs of churches as institutions are fulfilled through the system of state contributions, which makes church authorities relatively independent from the contributions of individual believers.

I argue that the financial arrangements between the state and the churches influence greatly the relations between the representatives of the religious institutions on all levels and the believers. In the case of the Greek Catholic Church I suggest that this difference in financing of the church institutions in Slovakia and Ukraine greatly contributes to the ways in which the instances of

Virgin Mary apparitions are dealt with in the respective countries. While in the Ukraine the church officials act carefully, cautiously and in less authoritarian way so they would not estrange the believers, in Slovakia the official church can afford itself a much more harsh reaction, renouncing any negotiation with the visionaries or the local site's managers. Although this difference in handling the situation could be also understood in terms of church history (e.g. greater influence of Eastern Christian, less hierarchical tradition in the Ukraine), taking into account a common history of the region, one could assume that the financial aspect of state-church relations is of crucial importance.

### Virgin Mary on the two sites of the border

The two apparition sites introduced above are linked by a few characteristics. While most of the Christian apparitions in Europe happen in the context of the RCC, in those two instances the visionaries are believers of the GCC. Hence, the most important negotiations are conducted with the Greek Catholic hierarchy. This affects the results of the negotiations as the apparition site can be instrumentalised in order not only to address the internal problems of the local GCC but also in order to position this church versus its two most prominent and hegemonic counterparts: the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. Moreover, until fairly recently the visionary from Slovakia and the manager of the Ukrainian site closely co-operated, visiting each other sites and developing a common strategy for negotiations with the respective church hierarchies.

Most importantly though, in both cases the Virgin Mary delivers messages that are directly relevant to the Greek Catholic Church politics in this region. It can be said that the Virgin Mary has its own vision on the future of this Church and its relations with the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches. This vision however, seems to be not always compatible with the positions occupied by the highest church authorities in both cases.

There is also a third Greek Catholic apparition not far away, which I mention briefly. The Virgin Mary appeared in Litmanová in north-eastern Slovakia, a few kilometres from the Polish border between the 1990 and 1995. I refer to Litmanová apparitions only *in passim*, as a case showing what could happen to the apparition site if the official church takes it over.

Since 2002 a lot has changed at the Ukrainian apparition site, which took its name from the name of the small meadow on which the initial spring is located – Dzhublyk. What used to be a small spring from where the inhabitants of two neighbouring villages took clean and tasty water became a building site. At the moment masses are conducted in a big chapel built next to the spring. There are plans to build an enormous church in the nearby forest on the plan of the

<sup>8</sup> www.mladez.sk

equilateral cross<sup>9</sup>. In the meantime cloister buildings for men and women are being prepared as well as a house for pilgrims and a big roofed assemble square in front of the chapel, designed for common prayers. There are the Stations of the Cross leading to the top of the hill behind the chapel, a circle-shaped healing bath around the cross in the central location and the long stairway leading to another cross put up as a place of prayer for a unity of all Christians. On the 27th of each month buses full of pilgrims arrive and on the 27th August each year an anniversary of the apparition is celebrated with fireworks and gathers several thousand people. The pilgrims come often from quite far away – mainly from Ukrainian Galicia (*Halitchyna*) but also from the neighbouring Slovakia. A few films were made about the apparitions, leaflets and booklets have been published as well as impressive number of religious gadgets: song books, poems, special rosary and Stations of the Cross prayers, pictures, calendars and so on.

According to Fr. Atanazji Cijpes, who is at the moment the leader and the manager of the site, all the buildings at Dzhublyk are planned and designed personally by the Virgin Mary. She is also responsible, according to him, for providing financial support for her plans. Fr. Atanazji sees himself as a builder and a manager, primarily interested in following Virgin Mary's orders and making sure that the apparition site of Dzhublyk will survive and grow. As he has said himself: I am responsible for building and execution of Virgin Mary's will – she is the one who is responsible for securing the necessary funds.

On the Slovakian site of the border, the apparition site has not become such a building site. There is a small wooden roof built over a simple altar, a few rows of wooden benches, figure of the Virgin Mary next to a nearby spring, secured behind a metal barrier because of fear of vandalism. There are rosary prayers led by the visionary every Sunday and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of each month. On the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparition maybe a couple hundred people gathered at the site and the visionary admits that there seems to be less of them each month. There is a small group of supporters in a nearby town, but the site has almost no backing in the closest village. The visionary is not a local person – she comes from northern Slovakia and she did not secure support in this village, advertising the site from the very beginning with the name of the closest town, where her former Basilian monastery is located.

Still, the visionary does not give up and the Virgin Mary supports her with ideas about alternative ways of site development. At the moment she takes courses in a medical school in a regional centre, so she would get necessary papers in order to open a care house for the poor and the elderly. She has established a

prayer and meditation group for the followers and hopes for establishing a new monastic order, a development which I describe in more detail below.

### Conditions for apparition sites' development

Atanazji Cijpes from Dzhublyk and Slovakian visionary know each other and they have met a couple of times. Fr. Atanazji celebrated a mass at the apparition site in Slovakia and the Slovakian visionary visited Dzhublyk and met with one of the girls, who communicate with the Virgin Mary. Their meetings were facilitated by the journalists of Virgin Mary periodical, *MRosa*<sup>10</sup>, which is the main Slovak journal of this type independent from Church authorities. The main articles in *MRosa* concern history and development of Marian cult sites, with special focus on recent apparition sites in Slovakia and neighbouring regions. As a private venture, it has to be tolerated by the church authorities, but it is by no means supported. Priests and bishops with whom I managed to talk about *MRosa* reacted with a mixture of disapproval and shame. First of all *MRosa* does not take into account the official position of the church towards the apparition sites and the journalists frequently write about the sites that are explicitly disapproved on by the church authorities. The journal is often critical of the church authorities, but it also publishes anti-EU and in general anti-West articles, written in highly emotionally loaded language. Yet, it is widely distributed at the pilgrimage sites and I have seen it in homes of many believers.

*MRosa* journalists used to write both about Dzhublyk as well as about the Slovakian site in Zemplín quite often. Presently however, while Dzhublyk is still in the main focus, the articles about the Slovakian site have ceased to appear. The visionaries and managers of both sites also do not meet any more. In August 2007 I have asked both Fr. Atanazji and the Slovakian visionary about the reasons for the break down of their communication and for their understanding of the differences in development of the two sites. The reason for interruption of contacts given in both cases was the same: pride. Slovak visionary claimed that the fast growth of Dzhublyk indicates that it has been overtaken by goals related to human rather than divine ambitions. Fr. Atanazji claimed that Slovakian nun has herself become a victim of her own pride as apparently she wanted to be a leading figure at both sites as the only adult visionary having direct access to the Virgin Mary. Hence, the initial plans, confirmed by both of them, to develop the sites in parallel have collapsed. Nevertheless, although personal disagreements could have been one of the reasons for cease of the collaboration, the difference in

<sup>9</sup> Atanazji Cijpes, personal communication, August 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Available at [www.magnificat.sk](http://www.magnificat.sk)

development of the two sites should be seen in relation to their different positions with regard to the politics of the respective church hierarchies.

The apparition site in Slovakia was met with disapproval from the hierarchy of the Greek Catholic Church from the very beginning. (See Chatur 2004) This is not surprising as nowadays apparition sites are not welcome, as most of them include some form of critique of the priests or the church hierarchy. At first, the church hierarchy usually ignores the sites. Only when hundreds of believers gather, the site elicits a direct reaction from the official church authorities beyond a level of local parish priests. Most often than not an initial reaction of the higher church authorities is negative – they try to discourage pilgrimage and discredit the visionaries. If this proves to be impossible and the number of pilgrims grows, the church authorities are usually compelled to establish a commission. This commission researches the consistency of messages with the doctrine, analyses psychological health of the visionaries, as well as the surrounding circumstances, with an aim to decide if the apparition is a deed of God, of devil or just a hoax. The work of this commission has also another, maybe more important function. It gives the church hierarchy time necessary to reflect on the developing situation and, even more importantly, negotiate with all the involved parties over the issues of ownership, control and management of a new pilgrimage site.

One of the main messages delivered by the Virgin Mary at the Slovakian site has been summarised to me by the visionary, who by that time had withdrawn from the monastery, as follows<sup>11</sup>:

These messages I received much earlier, just I could not talk and they were the reason for my withdrawal from a monastery. Mary wishes that a new monastic order is established, a contemplative-apostolic one that will spread the cult of Mary the Ruler of the World. And this order has to enrich itself mutually with spiritual richness of the West and the East. It will be neither Greek nor Roman Catholic – it should be both. All the prayers, all the masses should be amalgamated, should include both rites.

(A.H.: But liturgies are different? How does one achieve this in practice?)

This is not about destroying them. Rather, they should mutually enrich each other. The richness of both rites has to be accepted. (...) The order will have blue clothes, with white details and with a white rosary at the belt. And they will have medals: on one side will be Mary, the Ruler of the World and on the other side St Michael Archangel with a sword. It will be an order for both for men and women. (...) The order is called *Winning Armada of the Virgin Mary, the Ruler of the World*.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted in August 2006.

In order to understand this message, one should take a closer look at the position of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia. After the re-legalised of the GCC in the 1968 the hierarchy of the Greek Catholic Church in Slovakia supported very close links with the Roman Catholic Church, in ways going much beyond the obvious links in matters of theology and church administration. It can be said that the process of Latinisation of Eastern liturgy and aesthetics (both of which should mark a difference between these two branches of the Catholic Church) intensified. The liturgies were shortened, the style of singing changed and the churches functioned without iconostases. Furthermore, before the 1968 and also after, in villages where the Greek Catholic Church was not in operation, many people attended the Roman Catholic masses. This was so especially for most of the territory of the contemporary Košice exarchate, which was established in 1997.

Both processes of Latinisation as well as subsequent re-Byzantinisation have been long present in the history of the Greek Catholic Church in Eastern and Central Europe (Buzalka 2007; Mahieu 2008; Hann 2003). After the disintegration of the communist block however, and especially after the promulgation of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Church by the Vatican at the very beginning of the 1990s, in many Greek Catholic administrative units re-Byzantinisation has been actively promoted – iconostases were re-introduced into then Churches, such prayers as the Acatist were promoted, the musical instruments were removed from church buildings and so on. In Slovakia however, as my interlocutors assert, the full-fledged re-Byzantinisation started after the establishment of Košice exarchate, whose head, Milan Chatur belongs to a new, younger generation of priests, who do not necessarily fear closeness with the Orthodox Church. To the contrary, in Košice exarchate the main competitor of the Greek Catholic Church is not the Orthodox one, but the Roman Catholic. As one of my interlocutor, a Redemptorist monk of Byzantine rite has put it:

The identity of Greek Catholics has been lost. And some people ask until now – what is the difference, the same Pope... Well, why should I have to stand for 1 hour or for 1, 5 hour when there (in Roman Catholic Church – A.H.) I stand only for 30 minutes! This is the same mass, right? Well, yes, this is the same. And this is difficult for me to tell someone: man, there are also such things as moral obligation, it comes from grandfathers to sons, this is your obligation to keep it up!

He has expressed the opinion that the Greek Catholic Church in Košice exarchate loses believers at the expense of the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time however, the church hierarchy is clearly seen as supporting re-Byzantinisation. The same processes has started in the eparchy of Prešov a little

later, when an old head of the eparchy Jan Hirka was replaced by a younger, pro-Byzantine head Jan Babjak at the beginning of the 21st century.

According to the visionary in Zemplín, the situation around the apparition site has been inflamed also by the fact, that at the very beginning the site has been misused by a Slovak national activist from Prešov, who apparently faked some of the Virgin Mary's messages and distributed them in the towns of Zemplín. In these messages he called for a total abandonment of the Greek Catholic Church and full, liturgical and administrative, re-integration of it into the Roman Catholic Church. Although the visionary told me that she tried to explain to the Greek Catholic bishop that she does not intend to fight against the very existence of the Greek Catholic Church, her explanations were not accepted. She was directed to the psychiatric hospital, the apparition site has been explicitly banned and the order of the bishop to this effect was read in all Greek Catholic parishes of the exarchate.

The Roman Catholic Church, perhaps not surprisingly, has taken a less extreme position. The key priest supporting the visionary at the moment is a Roman Catholic and the prayers read at the site e.g. rosary, are read in both versions: the Greek and the Roman Catholic. The reaction of the Roman Catholic hierarchy however was much slower and milder. Only in 2007 the supportive priest was banned from celebrating masses in public. Nevertheless, other Roman Catholic priests, who are not so closely connected to the visionary, still come and celebrated masses at the site when people gather there on Sundays. No Greek Catholic priest comes to the site any more and the attitude of the Greek Catholic Church hierarchy is definitely hostile.

Some, maybe more cynical, supporters of the Zemplín apparition site from a nearby town explained to me that there may be at least one additional political and economic reason for this hostility, closely related to the issue of control of the site. Apparently the land on which the apparition site is located belongs to the people from neighbouring villages and is divided into dozens of parcels. There is practically no chance that all those people would agree to sell or transfer the rights to this land to the church, which only then would have a possibility to have a full control over the site's development. It is difficult to say how much does this issue really influenced the negative attitude of the Greek Catholic bishops towards the site – still, it is important that the local believers see the financial and property aspect of the situation as significant.

This interpretation is supported if we compare the situation of Zemplín site to the Litmanová site in Northern Slovakia, where Virgin Mary appeared between 1990 and 1995. The Virgin Mary appeared there to two small girls on a hill next to the village. At the beginning the site was supported and managed by the Basilian monks, but those were subsequently removed from the site and diocesan

priests were established in the village parish. As the monks encouraged and developed pilgrimages and prayers, so the site was already well-known in Slovakia (and also in Poland), the church hierarchy had to establish the commission judging the truthfulness of the apparition. Not much development has been achieved however until the owners of the land on which the apparition took place have agreed to transfer their rights over it to the church. Immediately afterwards the site has been declared an official "place of prayer" and although the apparition itself has not been as yet recognised, there are frequent masses there and the bishops visit the site. The new chapel is being built and the new painting, in Byzantine style, has been established in the main altar<sup>12</sup>.

The failure of the site in Zemplín therefore, can be interpreted as a result of lack of well-thought-through political and management strategy of the visionary. She has not received a backing from her monastic order, maybe because of the order's previous experience in Litmanová and their recognition of a strong political hand of the present leader of the Greek Catholic Church in Košice. She was not in position to negotiate with the church hierarchy, partly because the hierarchy is independent financially from the believers and because the question of land property at the apparition site cannot be easily solved.

The situation on the Ukrainian side of the border is very different, although there the Virgin Mary delivers what I call "political messages" that are potentially probably more destabilising for the *sui juris* eparchy of Mukachevo than a call for a Greek-Roman unity of the Zemplín site. Fr. Atanazji however, is a good negotiator and manager. He withdrew from a Basilian order (before the apparition he used to be a leader of an important monastery in Boroniava) in order to establish his own monastic order, but he managed to keep good relations with his Basilian brothers. He was also born in the neighbouring village of Nizhne Bolotne, where he has an unfailing support of a part of the village. Even though the initial reaction of the church hierarchy was also very negative, he managed to undertake successful negotiations. Although Milan Sasik, a head of the eparchy is sceptical about the apparition itself<sup>13</sup>, he is now even a formal head of a new order of the Holy Family established in Dzhublyk. Many local priests have commented that this change of attitude and acceptance has been fuelled by a fear of an internal split within the church, as Fr. Atanazji was clear that he would not give up on the site and he did have some important local support. More importantly though, the

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<sup>12</sup> Another aspect of this site, which goes beyond the scope of this article is its alleged initial Ruthenian character. The eparchy of Prešov, on which territory Litmanová site is located, is a hub of activity of the Ruthenian Greek Catholic priests, who see themselves as nation-awakeners and who feel oppressed by the Slovak hierarchy. They claim that Litmanová has been initially a Ruthenian apparition, considered as an identity-building site for the local population. Nowadays however, the masses there are mainly in Slovak and the Ruthenian priests are not involved in its operation.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication August 2006.

support for the apparition site in Dzhublyk is not only local, but it comes also from behind the Carpathian Mountains: from Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopil. The messages delivered by the Virgin Mary help us to understand why this is the case.

The two visionaries are inhabitants of a village of Nizhne Bolotne. All Nizhne Bolotne's inhabitants are Greek Catholic and, most importantly, they remained so all throughout the socialist times. It is an exceptional place in Transcarpathia, as the local Greek Catholic Church building in Nizhne Bolotne has never been fully closed or turned into a magazine or sport hall, but it remained a place of prayer throughout the communist regime. After the de-legalisation of the Greek Catholic Church, the local people refused to accept Orthodox priest, arguing to the authorities that they do not need a religious leader of any kind and they would not provide funds to support him. The key to the church however remained in the possession of the village cantor and throughout the communist times he was responsible for opening the church on holy days and conducting the ceremonies for the villagers without participation of a priest. Funerals, baptisms as well as other kinds of celebrations and prayers were conducted throughout the communist times either in private homes or in the church building. From time to time however, when the necessity arose (as in the case of weddings), the villagers invited underground Greek Catholic priests to provide relevant services. Those priests also held quite regular masses in private houses and Nizhne Bolotne became one of the main areas of operation of the most prominent underground priests of Transcarpathia, most importantly Petro Oros, Petro Pavlo Madjar and Ivan Margitych.

The most widely venerated among those is Petro Oros, who has been killed by militia on 28th August 1953, on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. His body remained buried under the floor of local police station until 1991 when he was exhumed and with a great procession moved to a chapel in his birth village of Bilki. Ivan Margitych and Petro Madjar were close co-operators, who survived as underground priests throughout the communist times. Especially Petro Madjar, who died in the second half of the 1990ies, is very much remembered in Nizhne Bolotne as a very active priest, always at the disposal of the people. In some houses, people still keep his hand-written prayers and speeches that he distributed among believers. He is so much venerated in this village that the memories about his underground work include descriptions of miracles.

The three priests knew each other, collaborated and they seem to share similar political views, but it is Ivan Margitych who is the most important person for the present argument. He also visited houses of believers during the communist times, but he is mainly remembered as a teacher of younger underground priests and a political activist. In church circles he is portrayed as an avid Ukrainian patriot,

which is consistent with his own writings<sup>14</sup>. He was declared an underground eparch in 1987 in Ivano-Frankivsk and throughout the communist times he kept close connections with the underground Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine on the other site of the Carpathian Mountains. He was also among the key negotiators involved in the process of re-legalisation of the Greek Catholic Church (Bendas 1999). His position with regard to the status of Transcarpathia as an integrally Ukrainian land was always clear. After the re-legalisation he strongly supported the administrative unity of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church under the jurisdiction of Kiev or Lviv. In 1991 Ivan Margitych became a helping eparch of the Mukachevo eparchy, officially responsible for questions of believers of Ukrainian nationality.

The present eparchy of Mukachevo, is an eparchy *sui iuris* directly supervised from Rome, hence in terms of church administration it is separate from the rest of the Ukraine. From the beginning of the 1990s, the issue of administrative division of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine was a matter of discussion in Transcarpathia and two basic options were considered: the *sui iuris* one and the Ukrainian-unity one. The supporters of both sides exchanged letters with the Vatican, with Lviv and Kiev and with each other. The *sui iuris* option, with the future eparch Ivan Semedii as its leader, presented a Mukachevo eparchy as a historically separate from the mainland Ukraine, multi-ethnic land in need of separate administration. Some of its supporters have underlined the Ruthenian ethnic identity of Transcarpathian Slavic-speaking inhabitants, arguing that treating Ruthenians as a sub-group of Ukrainians was a part of Soviet policy. The Ukrainian option, with Ivan Margitych as a leader, has argued that Transcarpathia should be seen as an integral part of Ukraine, the Ruthenians as Rutheno-Ukrainians and there is no need for a separate church administration. The Ukrainian-unity option has lost its battle and the Mukachevo eparchy remains a *sui iuris* one. However, my research shows that the option supporting the unity of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church remains strong, especially among those priests, who co-operated or were educated during the communist times by the underground eparch Ivan Margitych and Pavlo Madjar. These two late people are highly venerated by the pro-Ukrainian priests and those among the believers who support the Ukrainian-unity option.

Ivan Margitych did not give up on the issue of unity of the Greek Catholic Church until the end of his life. With help of priests of similar opinion, he was instrumental in initiating the change of the liturgical language in some parishes from Old Slavonic to Ukrainian. He also conducted work among believers,

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<sup>14</sup> I have an access to a private archive of Ivan Margitych, which is kept safe from the present authorities of the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia by his relatives and supporters.

convincing them to support his stance with the letters to the Vatican. The main declaration of his strong patriotic inclination is a huge church in Borzhavskoe, his native village. It was designed by Margitych and is a painted tribute to the history and the glory of Ukraine with such historical figures as princess Olga, martyr prince Boris, martyr prince Glib, prince Theodore Koriatovich, bishop Andrii Bachinskii, bishop Vasil Popovich, bishop Pavlo Gojdic, Aleksandr Duchnovich<sup>15</sup>, Manuil Olshavskii, Augustine Voloshin, patriarch Ioan Slipii, Ivan Liubachivkii and Andrei Sheptyskij adorning its walls.

What is a connection between this historical background and the apparition of the Virgin Mary in Dzhublyk? She appeared on the 27th August 2002 and Fr. Atanazji Cijpes claims that she has chosen this date not only because this is an eve of her holy day, but also because that is an anniversary of the death of Petro Oros – a venerated local underground priest-martyr. She has also chosen Dzhublyk because both Petro Oros and Petro Pavlo Madjar liked to stop and pray at this place on the way to their underground services for the faithful. One of the visionaries is a daughter of a local priest, who is known for his pro-Ukrainian-unity views and a former follower and private student of Ivan Margitych. She appears next to Nizhne Bolotne, a village, which throughout the communist times was a site of operation of pro-Ukrainian underground Greek Catholic priests. The present manager of the site and a head of a newly established monastic order is a former Basilian monk and the Basilian monks in Transcarpathia are known for their pro-Ukrainian sentiments – they conduct masses exclusively in Ukrainian and they live according to Kiev time, while most of other people keep their watches on the Central European time. And Ivan Margitych is the only person from the higher church authorities, who almost immediately supported the apparition site.

Virgin Mary delivers many “political messages” and in them she definitely supports the pro-Ukrainian option. It is her explicit wish that the liturgies at the apparition site are conducted in Ukrainian – the visionary stopped a priest, who conducted a liturgy in Old Slavonic and informed him that Virgin Mary wished for the liturgy in Ukrainian. Besides, one of the three main messages of this apparition refers to a necessity to pray for a unity of all Christians. Taking into account still very tense relations between the Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate and the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia, as well as relative lack of ecumenical initiatives, one could interpret this at first as the request to overcome those differences and arguments. Still, a closer analysis of the interviews with the supporters of the apparition site reveals that the unity of all Christians does not refer primarily to the unity of various Christian

denominations. Instead, it refers to a need of unity between different administrative units of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. In this way, the Virgin Mary supports a vision for the future of the Greek Catholic Church that was forwarded by Petro Pavlo Madjar and Ivan Margitych.

The most visible sign of the pro-Ukrainian aspirations of this apparition site are the Stations of the Cross built over the Carpathian Mountains all the way between the site and L'viv, vividly showing where the Transcarpathia should belong. The history of Ukrainian struggle for Transcarpathia also figures in the apparitions. According to the booklet distributed among believers, on the 14th March 2003 Atanazii Cijpes with one of the visionaries was driving next to Krasnoe Pole, which on the 15<sup>th</sup> March 1939 was a site of a battle between the supporters of the Carpathian Ukraine and the Hungarian troops. The visionary saw that the field is covered with crosses and, I quote, “at this moment father Atanazii understood that a child sees something unusual. He concluded that even today the memory of Sich fighters is commemorated here, at the place where they gave away their lives”.

## Conclusions

Private apparitions and similar religious experiences have been analyzed in the literature as psychological or cognitive phenomena without the reference to socio-political context. What I am interested in here however is precisely this context, as I believe that it has a crucial significance for the development of the given site. Under specific circumstances some of those religious experiences become focal points of pilgrimage sites, while others remain private despite the efforts of the people involved. It is not possible to overvalue the significance of church politics in these processes and the relations between the state and the church influence the church politics in crucial ways.

In the case of Dzhublyk I argue that the religious experience has been instrumentalised and skilfully managed and Dzhublyk has become a site of struggle for unification of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, pointing towards one of the most important conflicts within this church in the region. However, the character of state-church relations, especially in their financial aspect, has significantly contributed towards the success of the site. The church institutions beyond parish level are to a significant extent legitimised and also financially supported through agreements with particular communities, which gives believers a powerful argument in negotiations with church hierarchies. Dzhublyk is an extreme example, as its main message was directed against the independent existence of the Mukachevo eparchy. Still, it is rather symptomatic for a more general pattern of state-believers relations in Transcarpathian Ukraine, at least for

<sup>15</sup> Some of those figures (e.g. Duchnovich) are also considered national figures for other national movements, e.g. Rusyns.



the Greek Catholic Church. In many cases the believers use financial arguments in order to negotiate with the church: for example, there are cases when they refuse to pay a salary to a priest who does not conduct services according to local tradition. It can be said that the believers on the ground feel that their religious practices belong to them and they treat the priests as servicemen rather than ultimate authorities on the liturgical but also moral issues. The priests on their part have to take seriously into account the believers requests if they want to keep their job – the situation which for many of them is frustrating.

In Slovakia the situation is different: the fact that most of the church activities, including the salaries of the priests are financed from the state budget and the significance of villagers' own contributions is low leads to a relative independence of church authorities' decisions. Rather than involving itself with negotiation with particular local communities, the church seems to aim at establishing its image as a strong, authoritative institution, which should be a liturgical and moral guide to the believers. The type of state-church relations in Slovakia makes a realisation of this vision possible.

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