

Droits de l'homme sans frontières/ Belgique asbl

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Persecution of a Ukrainian humanitarian company as part of Russia's war

Today, we are witnessing the largest military conflict in Europe over the past 80 years, unleashed by Putin's regime in Ukraine. Tens of thousands of people have lost their lives in Ukraine and millions of internally displaced Ukrainians are seeking asylum in other European countries. But not all Ukrainians manage to start a new safe life in a prosperous and calm Europe.

The case of psychologists Yefim and Galina Shabshay

A striking example is the Ukrainian family of psychologists Yefim and Galina Shabshay. In 2022, due to hostilities unleashed by the Russian Federation, the Shabshay family was forced to leave Ukraine where their company was contributing to the psychological well-being of people, including soldiers victims of post-traumatic syndroms, and to start a new life in Europe.

When the Shabshai family was living in Ukraine, they had been the victims of a disinformation campaign by Russian religious extremists and followers of Alexander Dvorkin, "well-known" for his hate speeches against non-Orthodox minorities. When they arrived in the European Union, the persecution did not stopped.

Online guerrilla methods were used against them by the followers of Alexander Dvorkin, who was for many years the vice president of a French organization named "FECRIS" whose DNA is to spread defamatory statements against minority religious or belief groups, and which is however funded by the French government. This situation became known thanks to the report of the French human rights organization "Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience" at the meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, on March 17, 2023.

To understand the reasons for the attack of Russian Orthodox extremists, it is necessary to describe the background of and a short history of the "experience" of the two Ukrainian psychologists with Dvorkin's followers.

Persecution by the Russian Orthodox Church in Donetsk (Ukraine)

The Shabshay family first faced religious extremism in 2003 when a festival of master classes on psychology, art therapy and various types of body therapy was organized in the city of Svyatogorsk (Donetsk region). The best specialists in these fields from Ukraine and a number of other countries were invited to publicly share their expertise and their experience. But not everyone was happy with this initiative. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) accused the festival of propagating sectarian teachings and began to actively put pressure to have the event cancelled. The first attacks began long before the festival. The organizers received threats and calls demanding that the event be annulled. Articles began to appear in newspapers in which the Shabshay family and other organizers of the event were stigmatized as sectarians. Rumors were spread about the Shabshai family that rituals contrary to Christian beliefs were performed at the festival and that participants could be exposed to sectarian propaganda.

Galina Shabshai shared this moment with *Droits de l'homme sans frontières*: "We were shocked by such an attack on us and the festival. We tried to explain that the festival aimed at helping people who are interested in self-development, but our words were ignored."

The Russian Orthodox Church used every possible means to have the festival closed. They even approached the city authorities to this end as well as some newspapers to write negative articles about the festival and the organizers personally.

The Shabshai family contacted the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper. The journalists were given a detailed interview, the goals and objectives of the festival were explained, and all accusations of the Russian Orthodox Church were refuted. In the end, the organizers managed to defend their name and successfully ran the festival. But this was only the beginning of the activities of the apologetic Orthodox Center of Irenaeus of Lyon, the head of which is Alexander Dvorkin.

It is important to note that at the time of organizing and holding the festival in Svyatogorsk in 2003, the Shabshay family was only trying to find like-minded people. It was a festival for networking. Galina and Efim Shabshay only started doing business in 2009 in Donetsk. Until 2014, the Shabshay family operated exclusively in Donetsk. In 2014, the Russian army invaded the territory of Ukraine, namely the Donetsk region. Galina and Efim Shabshai were forced to move from Donetsk to Kyiv.

They only took with them their child, one suitcase with their belongings and left, fleeing the Russian troops. As a result, not only the company of the Shabshay family, but also all the property remained in Donetsk. This was the end of the Donetsk period and the beginning of the Kiev period.

The pro-Russian role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Donbas

In Kyiv, the Ukrainian psychologists opened a new company - Shabshai Technology. The activity of this company was founded on the basis of psychotherapy. Shabshai Technology

helped and still helps people to fulfill their potential, to cope with their problems and to improve the quality of their life.

In their practice, they use various methods of group and personal therapy. They were constantly engaged in volunteering activities. They helped ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) participants return to normal life and the military to cope with post-traumatic syndrome.

In 2015, a key moment came up, after which the attacks on our family and our company began to expand on a large scale. It was in 2015, after a forced move from Donetsk to Kyiv, that the Ukrainian psychologist Yefim Shabshai began to denounce the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and its apologetic centers.

Yefim Shabshai told *Droits de l'homme sans frontières* : “During our work in Donetsk, we were eye-witnesses of how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was brainwashing people and making money from their parishioners, without giving them any benefit in return. But our understanding of what was happening came with the occupation by Russian troops of parts of the territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. It then became obvious why the ROC acted so aggressively in Donetsk and tried to root out any dissent. The pro-Russian Orthodox propagandists were preparing the minds and paving the way to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. They were especially tasked by the Russian authorities to brainwash the local population. Taking into account the events of 2014 and the emergence of illegal separatist entities such as the DPR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and LPR (Luhansk People’s Republic), the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church had fulfilled their mission.”

Thus, after the temporary occupation of the territories in the east of Ukraine, there were many examples of what the ROC was actually up to, how they collaborated with the Russian special services and carried out subversive destructive activities in relation to the Ukrainian statehood. During group sessions, the Ukrainian psychologist Yefim Shabshai regularly exposed the subversive activities of the ROC to his listeners so that the fate of Donetsk and Luhansk does not repeat itself in Kyiv and throughout the rest of Ukraine. Of course, after some time, representatives of the ROC became aware of such statements by Yefim Shabshai. Shabshai Technology soon faced an unprecedented attack on its reputation. Unidentified persons sought out the ill-wishers and envious persons of the Shabshai family in order to deliberately create trouble for Shabshai Technology. At the same time, the initiators themselves of the campaign remained in the shadows for a long time and worked by using other people. The Shabshai family only learned years later that Alexander Dvorkin and his henchmen were behind the destruction campaign of Shabshai Technology, sowing hatred and lies for many years, including in their failed operation in Svyatogorsk in 2003.

Defamation operation

However, by 2015, the Shabshai Technology school and its methods were very popular in Kyiv and far beyond the capital of Ukraine - they were used by hundreds, maybe thousands of people. Therefore, it was not so difficult to find one or two "apostates" who, being customers of Shabshai Technology, were dissatisfied with something.

The mass attacks of Russian Orthodox extremists began with the fact that they managed to turn a video operator against the Shabshai family. She had worked with Shabshai Technology for several years and videotaped all the activities. The operator girl was a trusted person of Shabshai Technology and did not raise any doubts about her honesty and decency. That is why when she asked for a loan from the Shabshai family to buy a car, Efim Shabshai helped and partially covered the purchase costs of a car from the company's money. When it was

time to reimburse the financial debt a few months later, the video operator began to blackmail the Shabshai family. She said that she had accumulated a lot of video material against them. She threatened to edit it in such a way that it would discredit the Shabshai family and Shabshai Technology. The girl also threatened to give it to the media if they did not cancel her debt.

The Shabshay family refused to make a deal with the video operator because they had nothing to hide. The operator gave a biased video to journalists presenting Yefim Shabshay as the head of a sectarian movement. The media reports were deliberately distorted and false, with alleged but fictitious criminal cases against the Shabshai family and Shabshai Technology. There were also false accusations of sexual relations between the Shabshay family and their students.

After the video was aired by one of the Ukrainian media, the Shabshay family filed a lawsuit for defamation and protection of their honor and dignity. In particular, a lawsuit was filed against the TV channel which had posted the video. The court proceedings took many years and it is only in 2019 that the honor of the Shabshay family was cleared. As a result, the video was removed from all the resources of the channel. After that, for some time, the activity against the Shabshai family decreased.

Russian anti-cult groups attack Shabshai Technology in Ukraine

Surprisingly, after some time, the old controversial video was uploaded on YouTube by another Ukrainian TV channel and it was reposted by many new TV channels artificially created to discredit the company of the psychologists. This was the beginning of the use of online guerrilla methods against Shabshai Technology. All these fake TV channels had been created with only one purpose, to send the video to their clients. Russian anti-cultists were behind that operation the objective of which was to deprive Shabshai Technology of their customers. The first major target of the operation was Galina's client from Kazakhstan in 2019. The client canceled the contract with Shabshai Technology a few months after the defamation campaign started.

In 2020, there were massive attacks targeting Shabshai Technology clients with the controversial video. Shabshai Technology lost most of their customers this way. In 2021, the situation of the company improved again.

In 2022, after the Russian invasion, the Shabshay family had to leave their company in Ukraine and to relocate in Europe. Throughout 2022, the Shabshai family has been actively developing its activities in Germany, Spain and other European countries. But at the end of 2022, the campaign against Shabshai Technology, based on the controversial video and on false accusations of sectarianism, started again when the company announced several online events.

These were public events to be attended by partners and clients of the Shabshay family. After the release of the announcements, the names of partners, speakers and clients became available to the general public. Many began to receive the same messages with the same content as several years ago. Some speakers were forced to refuse to participate in Shabshai Technology events. In Germany, two potential partners of a family of Ukrainian psychologists also received defamatory messages and were forced to abandon the development of projects, fearing for their reputation.

As a result of attacks by religious extremists, Shabshai Technology suffered hundreds of thousands of Euros in losses..

That is why Galina and Efim Shabshai turned to the French human rights organization in the hope that they will be able to find protection and support in Europe and protect their good name.

Recommendations

On March 17, 2023, the representative of the French NGO “Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience”, Christine Mirre, at the end of her oral statement on the case of the Shabshay family, at the UN Human Rights Council, recommended the imposition of sanctions on Alexander Dvorkin and the associated organization FECRIS financed by the French government.

Droits de l'Homme sans Frontières also recommends the prosecution of people and institutions using hate speech against other religious groups, fake news and false accusations religiously or politically connotated against individuals and private companies such as Shabshai Technology contributing to the psychological well-being of people, including Ukrainian soldiers suffering from post-traumatic syndroms.