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MOLDOVA: President attacks freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Brussels and Moscow

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin has attacked the Bessarabian Metropolitanate's religious freedom on visits to Brussels and Moscow, Forum 18 News Service notes. During a press conference with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso on 14 January, Voronin stated that he had not ever threatened to revoke the registration of the Metropolitanate. He then claimed its existence could lead to a Kosovo-style conflict. Repeating his attacks after meeting Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy, Voronin claimed that the Metropolitanate "is part of Romania's aggressive policy." Presidential spokesperson Natalia Visanu told Forum 18 that "he merely said that if there are problems it could come to the point of looking again at its registration," she told Forum 18. Asked about the Kosovo-style conflict claim, Visanu stated that "the President said (...) the government could look at the question of not fulfilling the decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)." The Metropolitanate only achieved registration after a fine imposed on Moldova by the ECtHR, as also happened with the True Orthodox Church. A wide range of Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim communities are still denied registration.

Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin has stepped up his rhetoric against the freedom of thought, conscience and belief of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate on visits to Brussels and Moscow, Forum 18 News Service notes. During a joint press conference with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso on 14 January, Voronin stated that he had not ever threatened to revoke the registration of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate. However, he then claimed that the existence of it could lead to a conflict similar to that in Kosovo. His spokesperson Natalia Visanu insisted to Forum 18 that the President's remarks have been "misunderstood". Yet she declined to explain to Forum 18 why Voronin has made repeated hostile remarks about a legally-functioning religious community.

Bessarabian church members have condemned the remarks to Forum 18. "The problems we have faced – including the expulsion of Romanian priests and intrusive check-ups on our parishes – are the consequences of the president's remarks," Deacon Andrei Deleu of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate told Forum 18 (see F18News 28 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1076).

A week after Voronin made his remarks in Brussels, he repeated in Moscow his criticism of the Church. "The establishment of the so-called 'Metropolis of Bessarabia' and its structures is part of Romania's aggressive policy against the Moldovan state," Voronin told the Russian Interfax news agency on 21 January after meeting Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy.

Presidential spokesperson Visanu vigorously denied that the President had spoken out against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate (though she pointedly avoided ever using the name of the Church to Forum 18). "No-one said that the government should cancel its registration," she insisted to Forum 18 on 17 January. "It is a misunderstanding of the President's remarks. He merely said that if there are problems it could come to the point of looking again at its registration. The President has no powers to strip anyone of registration."

Asked about Voronin's remarks about a Kosovo-style conflict, Visanu responded: "The President said that if events around it are such that it leads to a worsening situation, then the government could look at the question of not fulfilling the decision of the European Court of Human Rights."

The Bessarabian Metropolitanate only achieved registration in 2001 in the wake of a fine imposed on Moldova by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg (Application no. 45701/99 <http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=html&documentId=697862&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649>). A similar fine from the ECtHR in February 2007 finally overturned the long-running denial of registration to the True Orthodox Church led by Bishop Antoni Rudei. It was granted registration in August 2007 at the same time as it was paid the fine imposed by the ECtHR (see F18News 8 March 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=926).

The only Orthodox jurisdictions to have been able to gain state registration in Moldova by applying through normal state procedures

are the Moscow Patriarchate and the Belokrinitsa Old Believers.

Without registration religious communities have no status in law, cannot run bank accounts, cannot employ people officially, cannot invite foreign citizens, cannot run bank accounts or receive funds, and cannot own, buy or sell property.

Bishop Filaret (Pancu), who leads the diocese in Moldova of the Kiev Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, said that his Church tried to gain registration again in summer 2007. "They give no argument as to why they won't register us – they just won't," told Forum 18 on 17 January. "We won in all the courts, right up to the Supreme Court."

Fr Vasily Ikizli, who leads one of four parishes in Moldova of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Agafangel (Pashkovsky) of Odessa, says his parish was denied registration in 2006. "They won't register any parishes until we have a national body registered, but they won't do that," he told Forum 18 on 24 January from the village of Congaz in the southern Comrat District. He said that about 150 people attend the liturgy each Sunday held in a private house and he wants to build a church. "Without registration that might be difficult."

Also denied registration are all Muslim communities as well as many Protestant congregations (see F18News 24 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=902). Talgat Masaev, who leads the Spiritual Organisation of Muslims in Moldova, complained that "someone must have given an order not to register us". He said the Justice Ministry rejected their latest registration application in December 2007, citing inadequacies in the group's statute. "The policy hasn't changed," Masaev lamented.

The Justice Ministry took over registration from the State Service for Religious Denominations in the wake of the adoption of a new Religion Law in 2007 (see F18News 6 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1003).

Masaev's Muslim group has long complained of police check-ups on those leaving Friday prayers. He said the most recent such check-up was in autumn 2007. "The fact that they check up at Friday prayers is difficult to understand," he told Forum 18. "This and the denial of registration are strange, given that Moldova is supposed to be moving closer to Europe."

The Bessarabian Metropolitanate is the only religious community to have been subjected to such repeated extremely hostile rhetoric from senior officials. Speaking on national television on 30 November, President Voronin condemned the decision by the Romanian Orthodox Church – of which the Bessarabian Metropolitanate is a part - to reactivate three dioceses in Moldova to add to the one existing diocese based in Chisinau. He warned that he does not need "a second Kosovo" in Moldova and threatened to revoke the official registration of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate.

Presidential spokesperson Visanu maintained that there had been no problem with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate having legal status until October 2007, when the new dioceses were created. She claimed their existence created "tension in the country". However, she refused to explain to Forum 18 what tension she was referring to or why the Metropolitanate could not set up its own structures as it chose.

Visanu denied that the recent developments with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate were connected with the rights of religious believers, which she claimed continued to be respected. "This is not the question. Its registration was alright until they restored their dioceses a few months ago, causing tension in society." She insisted there was a "sub-text" to the issue, but refused to spell out what she believed this was.

Asked by Forum 18 why all the non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox jurisdictions have faced denial of registration and obstruction of their activity Visanu responded: "The president doesn't have anything against non-Moscow Patriarchate Churches. I can't answer for the State Service on Religious Organisations or the Ministry of Justice. The President can't follow everything." (END)

Further coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Moldova is available at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=18&results=50>.

A printer-friendly map of Moldova is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=moldov>.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY