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The right to join together and express one's belief

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CRIMEA: Enforced departure of Turkish imams; FSB surveillance

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

All but five of 23 Turkish imams and religious teachers invited by the Crimean Muftiate under a 20-year-old programme have been forced to leave Crimea as Russia's Federal Migration Service refused to extend their residence permits. The rest will have to leave when their residence permits expire. "We can't invite anyone now as they say we have no legal status," Jemil Bibishev of the Muftiate lamented to Forum 18 News Service. "If they want to begin mission work in Crimea they will have to get a visa from the Russian embassy in Turkey in accordance with Russian law," Yana Smolova of the Federal Migration Service insisted to Forum 18. Representatives of a range of religious communities have told Forum 18 that they are under surveillance by the FSB security service. Greek Catholic priest Fr Bogdan Kostetsky has been summoned several times. Among the questions were some about his attitude to Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, who led the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944. The duty officer at the Yevpatoriya FSB told Forum 18 he had never heard that Fr Kostetsky had been summoned.

Russia's Federal Migration Service in the Crimean regional capital Simferopol has rejected all attempts by the Muftiate to allow for 23 Turkish imams and religious teachers to continue their service in Crimean mosques and madrassahs. Only five of the 23 remain, but will have to leave when their residence permits expire. The Crimean Muftiate had been helped by Turkish leaders in a programme that had been running for two decades. "We can't invite anyone now as they say we have no legal status," Jemil Bibishev of the Muftiate lamented to Forum 18 News Service on 26 August. "They told us to register first and then come back to them."

The spokesperson for Russia's Federal Migration Service in Crimea, Yana Smolova, confirmed that the Turkish imams and religious teachers had been required to leave. "If they want to begin mission work in Crimea they will have to get a visa from the Russian embassy in Turkey in accordance with Russian law," she insisted to Forum 18 from Simferopol on 1 September.

Told that the Turkish imams and religious teachers were not seeking to "begin mission work in Crimea" but to continue work they have been doing in Crimea at the invitation of the Muftiate over many years, Smolova said the requirement to get a visa in their home country was independent of whether or not they have been working in Crimea.

The enforced departures of the Turkish imams and teachers came as a wide range of religious communities in Crimea complained to Forum 18 of surveillance by the Russian FSB security service (see below).

Legal status or not?

Russian officials have given contradictory information to local religious communities over their legal status since Russia controversially annexed Crimea in March and imposed Russian law. The annexation has not been recognised by Ukraine or the international community.

The Crimean Department of the Russian Justice Ministry refused to tell Forum 18 from Simferopol on 26 August whether religious communities' previous registration under Ukrainian law remains valid. The Russian authorities are requiring all religious communities which want legal status to register under Russian law, with a deadline of 1 January 2015 (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

However, many religious communities which are subject to religious organisations in Ukraine – including the Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Armenian Apostolic Churches – remain uncertain whether and how they will be able to retain legal status (see F18News 10 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1995).

Turkish imams and teachers

Crimea's Muftiate has had an agreement over many years with Turkey's Diyanet (the state-backed body with oversight over the Muslim community) for it to supply imams and teachers to help Crimea's Muslim community. "These Turkish imams and teachers helped our communities to develop and people liked them and got used to them," a Muftiate spokesperson told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 13 August. "Of course we wanted them to continue working here."

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The spokesperson noted that the Muftiate has new local leaders in training but stressed that the abrupt enforced departure of the Turkish guests was "inconvenient for them and us and not pleasant for us".

The spokesperson was speaking the day the Diyanet representative in Crimea, Mevlut Seyhan, had been forced to leave. The previous day Deputy Mufti Ayder Ismailov on behalf of the Muftiate had officially thanked him for his work in Crimea in a formal presentation, according to the Muftiate website.

"Mevlut Seyhan was due to have been here for five years, but in the end he was here for only a year," the Muftiate spokesperson lamented to Forum 18. "We were very satisfied with all the imams and teachers and very grateful to them."

Bibishev, the official of the Muftiate involved in overseeing the foreign visitors, insists that the need for the Turkish imams and teachers remains. "We have 16 mosques without an imam," he told Forum 18. "Nor do we have enough religious teachers."

Uncertainty over foreign religious leaders

In addition to communities belonging to the Crimean Muftiate, a number of other religious communities fear it will become more difficult to secure adequate numbers of clergy. While many religious leaders are Ukrainian citizens (some of whom may be prepared to take Russian passports), others are led by citizens of other countries.

A number of religious leaders left after the March annexation, either because of the uncertainty or because they did not want to remain in a Russian-ruled Crimea. Among them were Protestants, Jews and Orthodox priests of the Kiev Patriarchate (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

One of the most recent to depart was Salvation Army Captain Ruslan Zuyev in June, though the two Crimean Salvation Army communities continue under local leaders. Zuyev was vocal in expressing publicly his pro-Ukrainian views, which led to his repeated summoning by the Russian FSB security service (see below).

"One of our priests – a Polish citizen – was told directly he won't get a visa in future," a representative of the Roman Catholic Odessa and Simferopol Diocese told Forum 18 on 2 September. The Roman Catholics have 12 priests in Crimea (eight Polish and four Ukrainian citizens). In addition they have eight sisters (five Ukrainian, one Latvian and two Polish citizens).

"The Ukrainian citizens among them said they would not take Russian passports which are being offered, so we don't yet know what will happen," the Catholic added. "All continue to serve at present."

The Lutheran Church – which has seven communities in Crimea – currently has no pastor. The previous pastor, Markus Göring, and his wife Lilli, returned to Germany in late August for family reasons, Lutherans told Forum 18. One local deacon remains. Expected visitors from Germany to a Lutheran summer camp in Crimea in August called off the visit because of the new requirement for a Russian visa, Lutherans added.

FSB security service surveillance

Representatives of a range of religious communities have told Forum 18 that they are under surveillance by the Russian FSB security service. "Of course all our calls are listened to," one Muslim told Forum 18 in late August in a typical response. "They know all about everything we do." A member of a non-Muslim religious community told Forum 18 in late August that fellow community members were being pressured to write reports on him and other community leaders. A member of yet a third community told Forum 18 that "they are constantly watching and putting pressure on us".

One Roman Catholic priest was approached by a man who claimed to be from the FSB, Catholics told Forum 18, asking that the priest not be identified. The man showed him "some kind of identification" and asked the priest to inform on the activities and actions of other Catholic priests. The priest refused.

Greek Catholic priest Fr Bogdan Kostetsky, who serves in the Holy Virgin parish in Yevpatoriya, has been summoned by the FSB several times, his fellow priest Nikolai Gavrilyuk told the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU) for a 3 September article. Among other questions, FSB officers asked him about his attitude to Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who headed the Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944.

A sermon on the Catholic faith given by Sheptytsky in 1900 was added to Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials in October 2013 (see F18News 25 November 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1899).

Fr Kostetsky and 15 parishioners were seized by unknown people as they travelled to Yalta on 2 September, RISU noted. They were freed the following day, but the priest declined to explain who had held them.

The duty officer at the Yevpatoriya FSB – who declined to give his name – told Forum 18 on 3 September that the head, Igor

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Danshin, was out of the office. Told about the FSB questioning of Fr Kostetsky, the duty officer responded: "And you believe this?" He insisted that he had never heard of such summonses and interrogations. "I would know if this had happened." Asked to declare categorically that Fr Kostetsky had never been summoned to the Yevpatoriya FSB security service, the officer then said: "I can't confirm this for certain."

The duty officer also claimed not to know about the apparent kidnapping of Fr Kostetsky and 15 of his parishioners on the way to Yalta.

No one at the Yalta police was prepared to discuss with Forum 18 on 3 September the apparent kidnapping of Fr Kostetsky and his parishioners.

Captain Zuyev of the Salvation Army was repeatedly summoned by the FSB security service before his June departure. "But this was more a political issue connected with his vocal pro-Ukrainian views," a Salvation Army official told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev on 3 September. "The Salvation Army is an apolitical organisation."

FSB-led raids and prosecution

In addition to conducting surveillance of religious communities and their leaders, the Russian FSB security service is heavily involved in raids particularly on Muslim mosques, madrassahs and private homes in the hunt for religious literature controversially banned as "extremist". The FSB helped bring the first known administrative prosecution for "extremism" for religious literature since the Russian annexation of Crimea. Esadullakh Bairov was fined on 26 August at Dzhankoi District Court in northern Crimea (see F18News 26 August 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1989).

Bairov – one of Crimea's Deputy Muftis - has not appealed against the fine as he is too busy with tasks in the Muftiate, he told Forum 18 on 3 September. Nor has he yet paid the fine, though the verdict does not go into legal force until 8 September according to the court website.

Bairov added that a separate prosecution is also being prepared against him in his capacity as director of Terciman Muslim bookshop in Simferopol (the name of the shop – which means "Translator" – is the title of a journal published from 1883 by the noted Crimean Tatar scholar Ismail Gasprinsky).

An official from the FSB security service, accompanied by other officials who did not identify themselves, raided the bookshop in July. The officials found several copies of two books which have controversially been banned under Russian "extremism" legislation. "We did an audit of all the books in the shop using the online version of the Federal List of Extremist Materials," Bairov told Forum 18. "We missed these two because the listed titles were not exactly the same – one had an extra comma in it."

Arson attack

On 21 July, unknown attackers set fire to the country home in the village of Mramornoe in Simferopol District belonging to Archbishop Kliment (Kushch), head of the Kiev Patriarchate's Simferopol and Crimea Diocese. The arsonists did not touch the next-door Transfiguration Church, which is built on his property.

Archbishop Kliment told Radio Free Europe's Crimean Service on 23 July that the arson attack was a further attempt to intimidate and drive out the Kiev Patriarchate. He complained that the police do nothing to catch the perpetrators of actions against his Church or prevent further attacks.

On the morning of 1 June, a mob attacked the Kiev Patriarchate church in a military base in the village of Perevalnoe in Simferopol District. They prevented the Sunday service from going ahead and took over the building. The church's priest, Fr Ivan Katkalo, was one of several Kiev Patriarchate priests forced to leave Crimea (see F18News 26 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1972).

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights noted the 21 June attack on Archbishop Kliment's country home in a 17 August report on human rights in Ukraine, made public on 29 August (http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UkraineReport28August2014.pdf). The report also noted the enforced closure of four Kiev Patriarchate churches in Crimea, two of them on military bases and two through "administrative pressure". (END)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Crimea can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86.

Reports and analyses on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia within its internationally-recognised territory can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10.

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