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RUSSIA: Deported Lutheran bishop seeks early return

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

Lutheran Bishop Siegfried Springer and the 170 congregation-strong Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia are baffled by the annulling of his multi-entry visa at a Moscow airport on 10 April and his deportation back to Germany the following day. "I want to return to Russia to our general synod to resume my pastoral work as soon as possible," Springer told Forum 18 from the German town of Bad Sooden-Allendorf. Although born in Russia, the 75-year-old bishop is a German citizen. A foreign Catholic bishop who was similarly expelled from Russia in 2002 has never been allowed to return to his diocese.

Bishop Siegfried Springer, who heads the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia, says he has no idea why the Russian authorities cancelled his multi-entry visa and deported him from the country on 11 April. "I want to return to Russia to our general synod to resume my pastoral work as soon as possible," he told Forum 18 from the German town of Bad Sooden-Allendorf on 18 April. "This is not about me, this is about our Church." He said he has no idea why border guards annulled his visa or what lies behind it. Asked if he was optimistic that a new visa would be granted he responded: "I base myself on facts."

Bishop Springer, a German citizen, flew from Berlin to Moscow's Domodedovo airport on 10 April but on arrival that evening a border guard cancelled his visa with no explanation, stamping it four times with the word "annulled". The one-year multi-entry visa had not been due to expire until next August. He was held overnight in the airport holding centre, which he described as "not pleasant", before being deported to Germany the following day.

The bishop stressed to Forum 18 that he has never criticised the Russian government. "I have always regarded Russian policy as good and recognise the improvements since Vladimir Putin became president. As a good Lutheran, I do not criticise the government where I live."

The bishop said the Russian Foreign and Interior Ministries are involved in resolving the case, together with the German Foreign Ministry and the German embassy in Moscow.

On 18 April the head of administration at the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in European Russia, Aleksandr Tserr, also seemed at a loss over why the bishop's visa had been annulled. He declined to comment to Forum 18 on the case, but explained that the Church was currently trying to clarify the incident with Russia's Foreign Ministry.

While directing Forum 18 to each other for information on 18 April, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Press Centre and Department for Information and the Press were unable to comment on the incident. A spokesman at the latter organ's Section for Operative Information told Forum 18 the same day that he had neither details nor a comment on the incident.

A spokesman at the Press and Public Relations Department at the German embassy told Forum 18 on 18 April that German diplomats were currently trying to clarify the deportation incident with the Russian authorities, and that he did not have any further details.

Bishop Springer is based in Moscow as head of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of European Russia, a member church of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia (ELKRAS), the largest umbrella body for Lutherans in the former Soviet Union. He was most recently elected bishop in 2002 and confirmed in office in February 2005. The Church he leads has some 170 congregations. Only about ten of the pastors are German citizens.

Tserr confirmed to Forum 18 that the late February 2005 re-run of the September 2002 church leadership election had taken place at the request of Russia's Federal Registration Service due to an alleged breach of procedure in forming the necessary quorum. (A March report on the ELKRAS website noted that while this request was "questionable from the point of view of church law", Bishop Springer and his assistant were nevertheless confirmed in their posts.) According to Tserr, the Russian state authorities were satisfied that no violations of the Church's charter had taken place during the repeat election. The long gap between the initial and repeat election was due to the Federal Registration Service's request being issued only this year, he added.

Bishop Springer said that throughout his thirteen years as bishop, officials have always been "friendly" and his Church has

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experienced "no problems". "We had difficulties over burglaries and things like that, but nothing at a state level," he told Forum 18. "On the contrary – we've had support from government officials and in Moscow the city authorities have given millions of roubles to help us rebuild our cathedral."

The 75-year-old bishop was born into a Russian German family in Mineralniye Vody in Russia's North Caucasus, but left for Germany during the Second World War. He returned to live in Russia in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since his return to Russia he has not applied for Russian citizenship.

In late 1999, Lutheran pastor Eberhard Behrens, also a German citizen, was forced to leave Russia's Volgograd region three months before his visa expired. While Pastor Behrens held an invitation issued by Bishop Springer, the local authorities insisted that he also required an invitation from his designated parish in the city of Kamyshin, which had not at that time been re-registered under the Russia's 1997 religion law.

Five foreign Catholic clergy – including a bishop – were denied entry to Russia in 2002 after the Catholic Church in Russia upgraded its four apostolic administrations to dioceses (see F18News 23 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=461). While none of these priests has since been able to return, foreign Catholic clergy in the Southern, Urals and Far Eastern regions of Russia have told Forum 18 that their visa situation has improved in recent months.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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

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