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TRANSDNIESTER: Why are authorities summoning Orthodox priests?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The Russian Orthodox bishop responsible for the unrecognised Transdnier Republic, in eastern Moldova, is not allowing priests of his diocese to attend meetings called by the unrecognised entity's senior religious affairs official, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Pyotr Zalozhkov, who reports to Transdnier's President Igor Smirnov, has in recent weeks ordered priests to bring to meetings copies of the parish statute, the document from the bishop appointing them to their position, their certificate as a priest and their personal identity document. Religious affairs official Tamara Kovalchuk, Zalozhkov's assistant, has dismissed Orthodox concerns. "We've had these meetings last year and this," she told Forum 18. "All religious leaders must be accredited. We need to know who the leader of any religious organisation is." Other faiths too, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, also face obstruction from the Transdnier authorities.

Russian Orthodox Bishop Iustinian (Ovchinnikov) has refused to allow priests of his Diocese to respond to summons issued by the senior religious affairs official of the unrecognised Transdnier Republic in eastern Moldova. Pyotr Zalozhkov, who reports to Transdnier's President Igor Smirnov, has in recent weeks ordered priests to bring to the meetings copies of the parish statute, the document from the bishop appointing them to their position, their certificate as a priest and their personal identity document. "These demands represent hooliganism and mockery of the Church," Fr Nikodim, an assistant to Bishop Iustinian, told Forum 18 News Service from Tiraspol on 4 August. "Catholics and Protestants have not received the same summonses."

Fr Nikodim added that the bishop also objects to Zalozhkov's demands that the Diocese's priests be "accredited" with the authorities. "We believe this procedure is humiliating for the Orthodox Church," he told Forum 18.

Bishop Iustinian gave an outspoken interview to the Russian Orthodox news website pravaya.ru on 31 July, setting out his opposition to these and other measures he regards as unacceptable.

Religious affairs official Tamara Kovalchuk, Zalozhkov's assistant, dismissed these Orthodox concerns out of hand. "We've had these meetings last year and this," she told Forum 18 from Tiraspol on 3 August. "All religious leaders must be accredited. We need to know who the leader of any religious organisation is." She insisted that all religious leaders need to do to get accreditation is to bring their identity document and a copy of the record of the community meeting selecting them as leader and registration is given. She rejected any suggestion that accreditation is an unnecessary bureaucratic control, insisting "this is required by our law".

"These summons started in the Slobozia Deanery on 25 July, but have now been extended to the whole diocese," Fr Nikodim told Forum 18. "They're summoning defenceless priests one by one seeking an excuse to accuse them of breaking laws by not having approved parish statutes."

Fr Nikodim explained that Russian Orthodox parishes have not changed their statutes since Transdnier's Religion Law was adopted in 1995. "The Constitution has been amended and there have been other legal changes, but why have officials suddenly picked on this? Zalozhkov says that because of this, all our parishes are acting illegally." He said the Diocese has sent its lawyer to try to resolve the complaint directly with Zalozhkov.

Fr Nikodim complained that officials are urging the diocese to change the statutes of individual parishes which would, the Diocese believes, increase their autonomy from the Diocese in ways that are unacceptable for a "united Church". "We've seen what has happened in Ukraine and Moldova, where parishes have just gone off and joined other jurisdictions," he told Forum 18. "If we changed our statutes as officials want, this would make such a thing possible here in Transdnier as well. Besides, the bishop would just be turned into a church representative with no power over parishes." He rejected the authority of the secular authorities to make such demands of the Church.

The Russian Orthodox Diocese of Tiraspol and Dubosary, which includes all of Transdnier, has over 80 churches and a further dozen chapels in prisons and hospitals. The Church says it has the adherence of ninety percent of Transdnier's population. Although Fr Nikodim says the Church has "constructive relations" with the authorities, tensions have been growing since the Church

excommunicated Zalozhkov in 2004. "This is a struggle with just one official, not with the authorities as a whole."

Other problems Fr Nikodim and the bishop have cited are the obstruction to the holding of a youth conference in Ribnita in November 2004, the insistence this spring by the tax authorities that all churches must install cash registers to record the sale of candles and other items, even though religious organisations are exempt from tax, and pressure from the local authorities to oust Fr Sergei Todorov from his parish in Pervomaisk in spring 2005. "Fr Sergei was a very popular priest, but the authorities stirred up people against him, organising petitions and slander in the press. We moved him last summer to a parish in another town just to avoid further attacks on the Church."

Although the tax authorities have now withdrawn their demand that churches have cash registers, Kovalchuk of the religious affairs department denied to Forum 18 that such a demand had ever been issued. "Religious organisations don't need them."

As for the obstruction by border guards over the youth conference in Ribnita, Fr Nikodim says the Church still does not know who ordered the obstruction, which saw buses held up and participants – including the bishop – having to reach the church on foot through fields. Fr Nikodim told Forum 18 that the Church was denied the possibility to report on the obstruction through local newspapers and television. "People at the TV station indicated they had received an order from on high."

Kovalchuk denied that any Russian Orthodox events have been or are being obstructed.

Other faiths too have faced obstruction from the Transdnier authorities, especially the Jehovah's Witnesses. Only two of their 32 communities there have been allowed to register and none of their leaders have received accreditation. "Zalozhkov won't register our communities and won't give accreditation," Anatoly Cravciuc of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from the Moldovan capital Chisinau on 3 August. "Although they haven't fined us for not having registration for the last two years, we want registration so that such fines won't suddenly start again." The Grigoriopol community has challenged the denial of registration in court, so far in vain.

Cravciuc said that Zalozhkov failed to have the Tiraspol Jehovah's Witness community liquidated through the courts, despite a long-running case beginning in 2002. "In 2004 the prosecutor's office failed, but they keep on trying," he told Forum 18. "Zalozhkov wrote to the prosecutor's office again in September 2005 complaining that our community is violating the law."

Cravciuc complained that Zalozhkov wrote last year to their communities asking for extensive information, including their income and expenditure, how many people are employed, how many children take part in services and what education plans the community has. He warned that failure to supply such information would result in a fine. "We challenged this as he has no right to demand all this information." The legal challenge by the Ribnita Jehovah's Witness community is due to be heard on 14 August in Tiraspol city court.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also complain of the impossibility of holding large-scale events. "We've not held a congress in Transdnier since 1997," Cravciuc told Forum 18, "though we'd like to." He complained that the Jehovah's Witnesses are banned from renting suitable premises. He cited a letter Zalozhkov wrote to factory directors several years ago banning Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and others from renting factory-owned halls.

Religious affairs official Kovalchuk rejected the Jehovah's Witnesses' complaints also. "They can say what they like, but it's slander and fabrication," she told Forum 18. "Their communities don't get registration because the documentation is not correct. And they can't rent other premises because missionary activity is only allowed in cult buildings. Renting factory premises is against the law."

Muslims (see F18News 21 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=613), Baptists (see F18News 10 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=138 and 29 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=41), and Methodists (see F18News 5 September 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=136) have all had problems in the unrecognised entity.

Religious affairs head Zalozhkov tried to have a new Religion Law introduced in Transdnier in 2004 to replace the 1995 Religion Law, which remains in force. Widely criticised by politicians and religious communities, the Law was abandoned (see F18News 5 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=313). Kovalchuk told Forum 18 that no new law is now being considered. Fr Nikodim said the Russian Orthodox Church would renew its pressure in September for the 1995 Law to be amended to make it analogous to the 1997 Russian Religion Law, which was heavily criticised by many when it was adopted.

A printer-friendly map of Moldova, including the unrecognised entity of Transdnier, 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