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MOLDOVA: Bureaucratic obstacles bar religious volunteers

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

The expulsions of four Romanian Orthodox priests from Moldova are being overturned on appeal and the priests are returning to their parishes, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. However, the lawyer for the Bessarabian Orthodox Patriarchate warned that it was likely that there may be yet another case against a Bessarabian priest brought at the end of February. Also, visa renewals for foreign Jehovah's Witness volunteers are now being refused. The government now refuses to allow the volunteers to work without a salary. "We don't want to draw up such contracts and pretend to pay people," a Jehovah's Witness complained to Forum 18. "We want to be honest. Why should we be forced to lie?" The permits for two Italian volunteers expire on 27 February. Many religious communities – including all Muslim communities and some Protestant churches – do not have legal status and so cannot even apply to invite foreign citizens to work with them.

As the Bessarabian Orthodox Metropolitanate thinks the problem of the expulsion of four of its priests back to Romania is being resolved, Jehovah's Witnesses have complained to Forum 18 News Service that visas for its foreign volunteers are now being refused. "We managed with great difficulty to get residence permits for 14 foreign volunteers last year since the rules changed, but the first of the renewals – for an Italian couple – have just been rejected," Anatolii Cravciuc of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 12 February.

He said the National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce – which handles work permits, the first stage of the process – will not allow foreigners to work as unpaid volunteers. "Our statute says that we engage unpaid volunteers, but they demand that we draw up a work contract with them," Cravciuc complained. "We don't want to draw up such contracts and pretend to pay people. We want to be honest. Why should we be forced to lie?"

Cravciuc says the permits for the Italian couple expire on 27 February, while those for the other 12 foreigners run out later in 2008.

One of the two Bessarabian Orthodox priests barred from re-entering Moldova from Romania in December 2007 was able to return to his parish in the village of Vadul-lui-Isac in the southern Cahul District on 10 February. He was allowed to return after he was cleared on appeal of having committed any offences. "Fr Ion Bigea returned to the village on Sunday after spending two hours at the border crossing," his lawyer Alexandru Postica told Forum 18 on 11 February. The Bessarabian Patriarchate is part of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Village mayor Alexandru Besliu told Forum 18 the same day that he welcomed Fr Bigea's return. "One of the priests, Fr Constantin Dumitrascu, has yet to return, but otherwise I believe all this is now over," he told Forum 18 from the village on 11 February. Besliu added that a court cleared him and seven others of organising what the police called an "illegal demonstration" in support of Fr Bigea and the other priests.

Postica said another Bessarabian priest threatened with expulsion, Fr Iulian Budescu, has also won two cases in court. However, as the lawyer told Forum 18, the case against Fr Budescu of living and working in Moldova without authorisation is likely to be reinstituted. "I believe he'll be summoned to court again for a new case at the end of February," Postica told Forum 18.

The four Bessarabian priests - all of them Romanian citizens invited by the Bessarabian Metropolitanate to serve parishes in Moldova - had been based in Cahul District. They were ordered to leave in December 2007 after the authorities claimed that they did not have the required residence and work permits (see F18News 4 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1067).

A Romanian Orthodox nun, who had also been working in Moldova, was also forced to leave the country quickly on 20 December 2007, Deacon Deleu of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate told Forum 18. She was warned by border guards that she risked breaking the regulation which allows foreign citizens to remain without a work or residence permit only for 90 days in any six month period.

The problems over the Romanian Bessarabian priests led the handful of foreign priests working with the Moldovan diocese of another Orthodox jurisdiction, the Kiev Patriarchate, to return hastily to Romania in early January 2008, Bishop Filaret (Pancu) told Forum 18. "We didn't want the same problems as happened to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate."

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Other religious communities – especially Protestants – have complained of cumbersome bureaucracy needed to get permission for foreign citizens to live and conduct religious work in Moldova, especially since the change in procedure which came into force in April 2007.

At least three ministries need to give permission. Applicants need to have a Migration Certificate, a medical certificate, a certificate confirming they have not committed crimes in their home country and insurance. The National Agency for the Occupation of the Workforce needs to approve a work permit, then this needs to be presented to the Interior Ministry's Department of Migration and Refugees. If approved, the papers are then passed to the Ministry of Informational Development, which issues the residence permit.

Many religious communities are denied legal status, including many Protestant churches and all Muslim communities (see F18News 29 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1077). This denies them the possibility of even applying to invite foreign citizens to work with them.

Valeriu Ghiletchi, President of the registered Baptist Union, said that foreigners are working with his Union, but that government officials have limited the number to about twelve. "Not all those we applied for were able to get permits," told Forum 18 on 23 January. "Officials said there was a quota but there is no clarity as to how this is assigned."

Several other smaller Protestant churches which have been denied state registration have complained to Forum 18 over the impossibility of getting such permits. One such is Greater Grace, whose pastor Julian Timofte, a Romanian citizen, has had to leave Moldova as he has used up the 90 days allowed each six months (see F18News 24 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=902).

Fr Vadim Cheibas, official spokesperson for the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova, said his Church has about ten foreign priests working in the country, all of them with residence and work permits. "It is no problem to get such documents," he told Forum 18 on 23 January.

Monsignor Benone Farcas, vicar-general for the Catholic diocese, said 23 foreign priests, 21 foreign nuns and 4 foreign monks are now working in Moldova with official permission. "There's a lot of bureaucracy but we've had no refusals," he told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 12 February. "When we ask, they grant."

Amongst Chisinau's Jewish communities, the Chabad Lubavitch community said that it currently has no foreign citizens working for it, nor any immediate plans to invite any. "Last year we got permission for a foreign citizen to come for a year as deputy rabbi," a community member told Forum 18 on 12 February. "There was no problem. The procedure is standard – all you do is present the set of documents. It is not difficult."

Petr Dontsov of the Old Believer Church of the Belokrinitsa Concord – which has 16 parishes and one monastery in Moldova – told Forum 18 that all his Church's priests in Moldova are local citizens.

Fr Bigea's returned to his Bessarabian Patriarchate parish followed a 29 January appeal hearing in Cahul. This overturned his 24 December conviction and fine for violating Moldova's laws on foreign workers, his lawyer told Forum 18 (see F18News 4 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1067).

Postica complained of the way the 29 January hearing started, with what he claimed were "crude violations of the law", including an attempt to prevent him speaking. But when he told the judge he would complain about his conduct of the hearing to the Supreme Judicial Chamber he said the judge "reconsidered" and the hearing proceeded normally.

Fr Bigea had not paid the fine of 600 Moldovan Lei (283 Norwegian Kroner, 36 Euros or 53 US Dollars) imposed in December. Given that his conviction was overturned, he was allowed to return to Moldova. "The decision is now final," Postica told Forum 18.

Meanwhile Fr Budescu – who had been ordered to leave Moldova but had not actually left – was cleared on 7 February by Cahul Appeal Court of violating the laws on foreign workers. Postica, who also served as his lawyer, told Forum 18 that the court cancelled the guilty verdict of 24 December, but sent it for new consideration.

Fr Budescu was cleared the same day of conducting any offence during an 8 January protest against the moves to expel the four Romanian priests.

In the wake of the problems facing the Romanian priests, local church members blocked the Cahul-Giurgiulesti highway on 2 January (see F18News 4 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1067).

In a larger demonstration on 8 January, a group led by priests and carrying religious banners and icons walked 40 kms (25 miles) along the snow-covered highway from Cahul to Giurgiulesti. In the wake of the demonstration eight of the participants were brought to court, accused of violating the Code of Administrative Violations by holding an "illegal" demonstration. Most were priests, but

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also among them were Besliu, the mayor of Vadul-lui-Isac, and the deputy head of Cahul District, who had approved the demonstration. On 17 January Cahul Town Court Judge Dumitru Moraru acquitted the group as the organisers had notified the district authorities in advance and received written permission.

However, on 24 January Dmitri Ciochin, the head of the District Police, lodged an appeal against the acquittal of the eight. "According to the Code of Administrative Violations, only participants in a case can appeal against a court decision or at the very least a public prosecutor," Postica, the lawyer for Fr Budescu, one of the acquitted demonstrators, told Forum 18.

Ciochin rejected Postica's assertion, insisting that he had every right to challenge the court ruling. "We weren't satisfied with the decision of the court," he told Forum 18. "We'd have done the same even if it was the Moscow Patriarchate."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out who brought the original cases against the eight. Besliu told Forum 18 the case against him had been brought by police chief Ciochin. However, one of Ciochin's assistants denied this to Forum 18 on 12 February.

Ciochin also defended the decision to prosecute the two local officials who had approved the demonstration. "Besliu the mayor didn't inform the higher authority as he should have done 15 days in advance," he insisted.

Besliu expressed astonishment at being taken to court for authorising a demonstration. "It is very strange, even unprecedented, that a mayor was taken to court for fulfilling his official functions," he told Forum 18. Besliu complains that all the actions against the Bessarabian parishes – whether from the police, prosecutor's office, the courts or borderguards – came "from above". "I view all these actions as very bad."

The moves against the four Romanian priests were part of what appears to have been an organised campaign against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate that followed its decision in October to revive three dioceses in Moldova. This decision was vigorously opposed by Moldova's President, Vladimir Voronin, who followed this with harsh rhetoric against the Church and the threat to strip it of its legal status.

More than 60 Bessarabian parishes faced intrusive state check-ups which began in December. Also checked were parishes of other Orthodox jurisdictions, including those of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kiev Patriarchate, and one Jehovah's Witness congregation (see F18News 29 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1077). (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.

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