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CRIMEA: Convent closed following nuns' enforced departure

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

Nearly 18 years after the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary established a small convent in the Crimean capital Simferopol to help in pastoral work in the city's Roman Catholic parish, it has had to close. The three nuns - who are from elsewhere in Ukraine and Poland - were refused extensions to their residence permits and had to leave in November 2014, a month after the parish priest was similarly forced to leave. "Just one priest remains in Simferopol to serve the Catholic parish," diocesan chancellor Fr Krzysztof Kontek lamented to Forum 18 News Service. "He has to do everything now by himself." December 2014 saw the last of the 23 Turkish imams and religious teachers forced to leave Crimea, bringing to an end a 20-year-old programme. Officials of Russia's Federal Migration Service insisted to Forum 18 that only registered religious communities are able to invite foreign citizens. No religious organisations in Crimea currently have legal status under Russian law and thus none are able to invite foreign citizens.

Almost 18 years after it was founded, a small Catholic convent in Crimea's capital Simferopol was forced to close down in November 2014 when its three Franciscan nuns had to leave. They were refused the possibility of extending their residence permits in Crimea, the chancellor of the Odessa and Simferopol Catholic diocese Fr Krzysztof Kontek told Forum 18 News Service from the Ukrainian city of Odessa on 15 January 2015. The sisters - who are from elsewhere in Ukraine and Poland - had been helping in pastoral work in the city's Catholic parish. Their enforced departure came a month after the parish's main priest was similarly forced to leave.

Also December 2014 saw the enforced departure of the last of Crimea's 23 imams and Muslim teachers from Turkey, a spokesperson for the Muslim Board told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 20 January.

Officials from the Crimean branch of Russia's Federal Migration Service insisted to Forum 18 in October 2014 that only registered religious communities are able to invite foreign citizens. As no religious community in Crimea or Sevastopol (an administratively separate city) has state registration recognised by the Russian authorities, no community is thus able to invite foreign religious workers (see F18News 3 November 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2012>).

A Russian law from 31 December 2014 extended the deadline for re-registering religious communities (and other entities) in Crimea until 1 March 2015 (see below).

Fines for religious books the Russian authorities regard as "extremist" seem to have reduced in recent months, though they did not stop. However, as the moratorium on raids, literature seizures and prosecutions in such cases ended, it remains unclear if such raids, fines and confiscations will resume (see forthcoming F18News article). Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and librarians have been particular targets.

The moratorium was announced by the head of Crimea's Russian-backed government, Sergei Aksyonov, in mid-October 2014 (see F18News 29 October 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010>).

Despite these concerns among a variety of religious communities, Aksyonov insists that his authorities will defend the rights of religious believers. "The rights of Crimea's religious believers, regardless of their confessional adherence, are well protected," he claimed on 19 January, in remarks quoted on the Crimean government website.

"Now we have only the bishop, six priests and five sisters"

The convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary was founded in Simferopol in March 1997. "The sisters tried to get Russian papers to remain in Crimea but couldn't," Fr Kontek told Forum 18. He noted that in addition to Fr Piotr Rosochacki, who was forced to leave in October 2014, other Catholic priests too have been forced out. "Some chose not to apply for Russian papers - Migration Service officials had 'recommended' to them not to apply." Fr Kontek said he did not know why officials had given such "recommendations".

Fr Rosochacki, the main priest at Simferopol's Assumption of the Virgin Mary parish, was the first Roman Catholic priest forced to leave (see F18News 3 November 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2012>).

"Just one priest remains in Simferopol to serve the Catholic parish," Fr Kontek lamented to Forum 18. "He has to do everything now by himself."

In March 2014, before the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Roman Catholic Church had a bishop, Jacek Pyl, 12 priests and eight sisters in the peninsula, Fr Kontek noted. "Now we have only the bishop, six priests and five sisters." Bishop Pyl - a Polish citizen - has been promised a Russian residence permit allowing him to remain in Crimea, Fr Kontek added.

Enforced departure of last Turkish imams and teachers

The enforced departure of the last of the original 23 Turkish imams and teachers who had been working in Crimea at the invitation of the Muslim Board means that all its imams and religious teachers are now local people, the Muslim Board spokesperson told Forum 18.

The Turkish imams and teachers had been supplied by the Turkish government's Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs) under a programme that had been running for two decades. "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 in August 2014. "Of course we wanted them to continue working here" (see F18News 3 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992>).

When Crimea's chief mufti Emirali Ablaev met Mehmet Görmez, the head of the Turkish government's Diyanet in Ankara in November 2014, he stressed the continuing need for such Turkish teachers and imams in Crimea. "The Muslim Board wants this issue resolved," the spokesperson told Forum 18.

"We've done all we can within our competence"

Aleksandr Selevko, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry in Simferopol, said that in response by concerns from some religious communities over the current impossibility of inviting foreign citizens for religious work, he wrote to Russia's Justice Ministry in December 2014.

"We asked them to review the law and introduce a special procedure for foreign religious workers to be able to continue to work in Crimea as they had been able under Ukrainian law," he told Forum 18 on 20 January. "The Ministry did not initiate a change to the law. We've done all we can within our competence. We can't resolve this ourselves."

Selevko added that he had met Bishop Pyl several times and explained the situation to him. He did not mention to Forum 18 any meetings with Muslim Board officials to discuss how to bring Turkish imams and teachers back to Crimea.

Re-registration uncertainty

Following meetings with leaders of about ten religious communities - including Lutheran, Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Karaim representatives - on 29 December 2014, head of government Aksyonov acknowledged that worries about re-registration were "the main concern" they raised, according to the government website.

With Russia's Justice Ministry in Moscow and its local branch in Crimea having failed to re-register any religious communities in Crimea or Sevastopol by the previously-declared deadline of 31 December 2014, the deadline was extended to 1 March 2015. The extension came in an amending law finally adopted by Russia's Parliament on 25 December 2014 and signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on 31 December 2014.

Crimean religious communities which are seeking status as centralised Russian religious organisations need to re-register with the Justice Ministry in Moscow. Ones that are not seeking such status need to re-register in Crimea.

No religious organisations in Crimea or Sevastopol were listed on the Justice Ministry website as having state registration on 19 January, the date of the latest update. Irina Demetskaya, head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Ministry in Simferopol, told Forum 18 on 20 January that her Department had approved re-registration for eight local religious communities - all of them Pentecostal or Evangelical Christian. She said their documents are now with the tax authorities for approval before registration certificates can be issued.

Demetskaya added that her two other religious communities seeking independent re-registration - an Augsburg Lutheran congregation and a Baptist congregation - have had their applications sent to Moscow as required by regulations for the Justice Ministry to conduct an "expert analysis" before re-registration can be granted.

A total of 1,546 religious communities in Crimea had state registration with the Ukrainian authorities at the time Russia annexed the peninsula in March 2014 (see F18News 10 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1995>).

Asked if religious communities which are subject to oversight bodies in Ukraine - including the dioceses of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Kiev Patriarchate, as well as parishes of the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church - will be able to get state registration, Demetskaya was vague. "They'll have to undergo expert analysis in Moscow," was all she would say.

Many religious communities have told Forum 18 that they lodged re-registration applications by the end of December 2014 but have received no response from the Justice Ministry so far.

Selevko of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department was ready to excuse what appears to be a chaotic re-registration process. "We don't have experience of a territory moving from one legal field to another," he told Forum 18. But he stressed that he is not involved in the re-registration process. "It's not my kitchen." (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>.

A printer-friendly map of the disputed territory of Crimea, whose extent is not marked, can be found in the south-east of the map entitled 'Ukraine' http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Ukraine&ar_a=1.

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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