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CRIMEA: "All our priests and nuns will have to leave by the 2014 year end"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

Russia's Federal Migration Service is not extending residence permits for foreign citizens who have been working for Crimean religious communities, leaving Simferopol's Roman Catholic parish without its senior priest, Polish citizen Fr Piotr Rosochacki, who had worked in Crimea for 5 years. All other Catholic priests and nuns will have to leave by the end of 2014. Similarly, almost all Turkish Muslim imams and religious teachers have been forced to leave Crimea. The Federal Migration Service in Crimea told Forum 18 News Service that only registered religious communities can invite foreign citizens. No Crimean religious communities have registration, and under a Russian law which entered into force on 1 July all religious communities must apply for re-registration by 1 January 2015. There is uncertainty about what will happen to applications from communities under bodies outside Crimea or Russia - including Crimea's Armenian Apostolic, Old Believer, Moscow Patriarchate, Roman Catholic and Kiev Patriarchate parishes.

Russia's Federal Migration Service has refused to extend residence permits for foreign citizens who have been working for local religious communities in Crimea for some years. This has left the Roman Catholic parish in the capital Simferopol without its senior priest, Polish citizen Fr Piotr Rosochacki, who had worked in Crimea for five years. All other Roman Catholic priests and nuns will have to leave by year's end. Catholic appeals to the authorities against this have not been heeded. Similarly, almost all Turkish Muslim imams and religious teachers have been forced to leave Crimea. Yana Smolova of Russia's Federal Migration Service in Crimea insisted to Forum 18 News Service that only registered religious communities can invite foreign citizens.

Crimea's Justice Ministry confirmed to Forum 18 that no religious communities have registration in Crimea and all the applications for registration under Russian law have been rejected so far (see below). This means that no religious communities are in a position to invite new foreign citizens or to extend residence permits for those already working in Crimea.

Under a law adopted by the Russian parliament in April and signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on 5 May, all legal entities in Crimea (including religious communities) need to bring their statutes into line with Russian law and apply for entry on the unified register of legal entities if they wish their legal status to continue. The law entered into force on 1 July and organisations need to apply by 1 January 2015 (see F18News 10 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1995>).

"I don't know. It's not my problem"

Asked on 23 October 2014 about the enforced departure of Fr Rosochacki and the Turkish imams and teachers, Aleksandr Selevko, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry in Simferopol, told Forum 18: "I don't know. It's not my problem." He referred all enquiries to the Federal Migration Service. "We lost this function, which has now been handed to them."

Selevko confirmed that no religious communities in Crimea have Russian registration, but similarly indicated that this was not his concern. He refused to give an example of any help his office had given any religious community and put the phone down.

No action from human rights Ombudsperson

Kseniya Tyamnik, chief specialist to Crimea's government-appointed human rights Ombudsperson Lyudmila Lubina, said no one had appealed to her office about the Russian Federal Migration Service's refusal to extend residence permits for Catholic priests and Turkish Muslim imams and teachers, thus forcing them to leave Crimea. "We've had no appeals, either in writing or on the hotline," she told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 23 October. "I can't say why people don't appeal. We've had many appeals from citizens on other issues."

Asked what action the Ombudsperson would take on the enforced departure of religious leaders invited by local religious communities, Tyamnik indicated that no action would be taken.

Tyamnik also said no appeals had been received about the many raids, seizures of religious literature and fines against Muslim and

Jehovah's Witness people and communities, which have been criticised by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. She also said that the Ombudsperson was not planning to take any action about these incidents (see F18News 29 October 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010>).

Enforced departure of Catholic priest

Fr Rosochacki - one of two priests at Simferopol's Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish - was forced to leave Crimea on 24 October, the day before the expiry of his Ukrainian residence permit which the Russian authorities refused to extend. "Of course I want to be able to return to my parish soon," he told Forum 18 on 28 October.

Fr Rosochacki's departure followed that of 18 of the 23 Turkish imams and religious teachers who have long served Crimea's Muslim community (see F18News 3 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992>). Residence permits for the remaining five Turkish citizens will expire in November and December.

The next residence permit for other foreign Roman Catholic priests and nuns due to expire is that of Sister Irena Olszak on 16 December. "Although other priests and nuns have Ukrainian residence permits for Crimea valid into next year [2015], the Russian authorities have said they will regard them as valid only until the end of this year," Fr Rosochacki told Forum 18. "This means all our priests and nuns will have to leave by the 2014 year end."

No registration, no invitations

On receiving a verbal rejection of the extension of his residence permit, Fr Rosochacki appealed to a number of agencies, including the Prosecutor's Office. "I had no response", he told Forum 18.

Fr Rosochacki had also raised the residence permit denials to foreign Catholic representatives at a 4 September meeting in Simferopol of Crimea's Inter-Religious Council. The meeting was attended by the acting head of the Russian-backed Crimean government, Sergei Aksyonov, as well as Crimea's Chief Prosecutor, Natalya Poklonskaya. In response, Poklonskaya promised to investigate the issue (see F18News 11 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1996>).

Despite Forum 18's repeated requests since 10 September for information on Poklonskaya's promised investigation, it has received no response from Crimea's Prosecutor's Office.

Smolova of Russia's Federal Migration Service in Crimea insisted that the Catholic community's lack of legal status was the reason for the refusal to extend Fr Rosochacki's residence permit to allow him to continue serving his parish. "If an organisation in Crimea is registered as a legal entity, it has the right to invite foreign citizens in accordance with the law of the Russian Federation," she told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 27 October.

Asked whether - as no religious community in Crimea has any legal status recognised by the Russian authorities - religious communities are therefore deprived of the possibility of retaining their religious leaders if they are foreign citizens, Smolova responded: "The Federal Migration Service does not deal with questions of state registration of legal entities."

Fr Rosochacki remains concerned about how the Catholic community will secure permission for foreign priests and nuns in future. "The Federal Migration Service told us they have a lot of work at the moment and would only be able to deal with any applications again in the new year," he told Forum 18.

Greek Catholic residence problems, but none for Kiev Patriarchate

Speaking in Lviv in western Ukraine on 23 October, the head of the Greek Catholic Church Archbishop Svyatoslav Shevchuk stated that only one of their five Crimean parishes - in Yevpatoriya - still has a priest. Priests serving their other parishes - in Simferopol, Sevastopol, Yalta and Kerch - have been forced to leave because the Russian authorities insist that, as Ukrainian citizens, they can remain for only 90 days before being required to leave for 90 days (see F18News 27 June 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973>).

In contrast, 11 priests of the Kiev Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church - many of whom had fled Crimea after the Russian annexation in March - have been able to return, Archbishop Kliment (Kushch) of Simferopol and Crimea told Forum 18 on 28 October. He said five of the 11 had taken up the offer of Russian citizenship, easing residence difficulties. The others have no problems at the moment with their Ukrainian passports, as they were already registered as Crimean residents at the time of Russia's referendum in March, he added.

"We went through some tough times earlier this year," Archbishop Kliment told Forum 18, "but the situation has now normalised." He said threats to sharply increase the rent the Church pays on its cathedral in Simferopol have apparently gone away at present. The Church had feared this was an attempt to price them out of the building (see F18News 27 June 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973>).

No registration

No religious organisations in Crimea have gained registration since Russia imposed its compulsory re-registration following its March annexation of the peninsula, Irina Demetskaya, head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Ministry in Simferopol confirmed. She noted that the deadline for applications under Russian law in force in Crimea is 1 January 2015 (see F18News 10 September 2014 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1995>).

The most recent update of the Russian Justice Ministry's online register of non-commercial organisations, dated 24 October, similarly lists no registered religious organisations either in Crimea or in the administratively-separate city of Sevastopol.

"Only five religious organisations have applied so far and all have been rejected," Demetskaya of Crimea's Justice Ministry told Forum 18 on 23 October. She said one was the Muftiate, another "some Evangelical Protestants", but struggled to or did not wish to identify the other three. She refused to say why all five applications had been rejected.

Many religious communities - including Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant communities - told Forum 18 that despite the looming deadline, they are still reviewing how they can apply for registration in a way that preserves the structures they wish to retain.

What will happen to communities under Ukrainian religious oversight?

Some communities' religious oversight bodies are outside Crimea or Russia, such as Crimea's Armenian Apostolic, Old Believer, Moscow Patriarchate, Roman Catholic, and Kiev Patriarchate parishes (all of which are part of Ukrainian-based dioceses). Asked what their situation was, Demetskaya of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Crimean Justice Ministry insisted they could register if they get approval from a Russian-based organisation, or if they register as independent communities.

Since the Russian annexation, some religious communities have transferred oversight of their Crimean communities from Ukrainian to Russian bodies. On 1 October, Jehovah's Witnesses took this step.

However, others have declined to do transfer oversight from Ukrainian to Russian bodies. The Moscow Patriarchate's Holy Synod ruled in March that the Patriarchate's three dioceses in Crimea should not transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church and should remain under the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (an autonomous Orthodox church with its headquarters in Kiev under the Moscow Patriarchate's jurisdiction).

Similarly, following "long discussions", a synod in Moscow of the Old Believer Church of the Belaya Krinitza Concord decided on 22 October to leave its Crimean parishes under the jurisdiction of its Ukrainian diocese for the moment. It postponed further discussion of the issue till the next synod.

Roman Catholic parishes are part of the Odessa-based diocese in Ukraine. "Unfortunately, Odessa is foreign - they won't be able to get approval from there", Demetskaya of the Justice Ministry stated to Forum 18. Asked if this means that, if they wish to gain legal status, Crimea's Catholic communities will have to distort their canonical structures, she responded: "Yes."

Asked what will happen to Moscow Patriarchate dioceses and parishes which are part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, Demetskaya stated that "all they need is confirmation from the Moscow Patriarchate in Russia".

Asked whether Russian officials would allow communities of the Kiev Patriarchate Ukrainian Orthodox Church to get Russian registration if they apply for it, Demetskaya appeared unsure. "They'll get it only if the Moscow Patriarchate gives its OK", she responded initially.

Told that the Kiev Patriarchate is independent of the Moscow Patriarchate, Demetskaya then insisted that like anyone else they could apply to the state. She refused to say whether officials - who appear to regard Kiev Patriarchate communities with mistrust - would refuse to process their registration applications. (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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