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TRANSDNIESTER: Religious materials routinely confiscated at border

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Protestants, Russian Orthodox and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained of continuing problems in bringing religious literature and objects through checkpoints operated by the unrecognised entity of Transdnier, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Religious material is routinely confiscated, the most recent known case being a Russian Orthodox priest, Fr Oleg Cernat, whose car was impounded for four days as he did not declare church candles. After agreeing to take the candles home, Fr Cernat's car was stopped again and he was also accused of driving away from the checkpoint without authorisation. Religious communities such as Baptists complain that confiscated literature is frequently not returned, and only members of registered communities are allowed to import literature. Transdnier is considering a draft Religion Law, which proposes to - amongst other restrictions - stop religious communities which do not have legal status from producing and importing literature.

Baptists and other Protestants, as well as Russian Orthodox and Jehovah's Witnesses have complained about continuing problems trying to bring religious literature and objects through checkpoints operated by the breakaway unrecognised entity of Transdnier, in eastern Moldova, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Religious material is routinely confiscated, while in the most known recent case, a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church had his car impounded for four days after failing to declare church candles. Fr Oleg Cernat was taking the candles from his home in the suburbs of Dubosary, in Transdnier, to the Moldovan capital Chisinau.

Transdnier's checkpoints and Border Service are under the control of the State Security Ministry in the Transdnieran capital Tiraspol. However, the Ministry's press office repeatedly refused to discuss its confiscation policy with Forum 18. Each time Forum 18 reached the office on 12 November and explained who was calling, the official put the phone down. Religious literature confiscations - including confiscations within Transdnier - are a continuing problem (see F18News 17 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1035>).

The office of Transdnier's Commissioner for Religious Affairs, Pyotr Zalozhkov, also put the phone down on the many occasions that Forum 18 telephoned on 12 November.

Orthodox priest Fr Cernat, who lives in Corjova on the outskirts of Dubosary, told Forum 18 that on the morning of 26 October he arrived at the control post on the edge of Transdnier's territory. When Transdnier Customs checked the contents of his car they found forty packets of church candles, which they said he should have declared. "I said I had no time to declare them," Fr Oleg told Forum 18 on 12 November. "All this is a very long procedure." He said he then agreed with the border guards that he would drive home, leave the candles there and then come back to the checkpoint.

However, as he was driving away Fr Oleg says officials stopped his car and accused him of violating the customs regime and driving away from the checkpoint without authorisation to do so. He said he was then held for the next nine hours, being freed at 6pm and allowed to go home. He said he had to pay 530 Transdnieran Roubles (337 Norwegian Kroner, 43 Euros or 63 US Dollars) as a surety for his car. He did not get the car back until four days' later.

Fr Oleg insisted to Forum 18 that "this is not the first such incident for me". However, he declined to discuss previous incidents.

Fr Oleg's case is unusual in that he was obstructed from taking religious objects out of Transdnier. Border guards - who are subject to Transdnier's State Security Ministry - generally obstruct religious literature and objects being brought into the territory. It has also been suggested that the State Security Ministry monitors telephone conversations to gain information to guide religious literature confiscations within Transdnier (see F18News 17 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1035>).

On 13 October, Vasily Rotar, who leads the more than 200-strong Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the Transdnieran town of Bendery, wanted to bring church magazines into the entity for members of his congregation. As he told Forum 18 on 12 November, he decided to get out of his car before the Transdnieran checkpoint to make sure border guards and customs officials had no objections to the 286 copies of their Russian-language magazine "Herald of Truth" and six copies of their

Romanian-language book "Children's Friend".

"I told the border guards that if they wouldn't allow the literature through I would take it back and return to cross over into Transdnister without it," he told Forum 18. "They said it would not cause problems." However, when Rotar returned in his car they confiscated all the literature. "I told them they had said the literature was not contraband and that I had asked them honestly as a conscientious person. But that didn't help." A confiscation record was drawn up, but officials refused to give him a copy.

Rotar told Forum 18 he then went to the army post at the checkpoint and tried to explain to the major on duty that he had done everything correctly. However the literature was not returned. Rotar told the border guards that he would complain to the Prosecutor's Office. "We wrote, but they haven't replied," he told Forum 18. "They don't hurry."

However, on 8 November he said he was summoned to the Tiraspol Prosecutor's Office, where he gave officials a further copy of his complaint. "They said they had lost my original complaint."

Rotar complains that border guards routinely take Christian literature from church members, if border guards find more than two copies. "I want to know what right they have to seize our literature," he told Forum 18. "If they don't have the right, let them return it. Otherwise it would be theft. In practice we don't have access to our own literature." He insists that the literature confiscated from him contains nothing against the state. He added that the literature belongs to church members and was intended for their own personal reading.

Rotar explained that the State Security Ministry has instructed border guards not to allow their literature to cross through their checkpoints, as Council of Churches congregations do not have state registration. "Each checkpoint has a copy of list of approved religious organisations allowed to import literature," he told Forum 18. "They say as we don't have registration we're not in this list so we can't import literature. I say to them: Give us this right!"

Jehovah's Witness Daniil Podolyan had eight copies of the Bible and 243 copies of the magazine "Watchtower" confiscated at the Varnitsa checkpoint on 14 October as he was returning to Transdnister (see F18News 17 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1035>). Despite several attempts to retrieve them by protesting to the border guard unit in Bendery and units in Tiraspol, Podolyan has likewise not had the literature returned.

The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 12 November that Podolyan wrote a complaint on 19 October but has still not had a response. "When the literature was confiscated an official record was drawn up," Podolyan wrote in his complaint, "which declared that religious literature is being confiscated because its import into Transdnister is banned." Although he was given a receipt for the confiscated literature "it was not explained to me in the written record or verbally what law I had broken". He declared that he therefore considered the confiscation "illegal".

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that Podolyan is prepared to take the border guards to court if his complaint fails to secure the return of his literature.

Forum 18 has seen copies of several official records of the confiscation of religious literature from Jehovah's Witnesses dating from 2000 and 2001. They note that such literature has been confiscated on the basis of Directive No. 1-16/681 of 1 November 1999, issued by the Department of Religions and Religious Denominations. Forum 18 has been unable to obtain the text of this Directive, to find out if it is still in force or what it contains.

In a strange move, in 2003 the head of a unit of the border guards, Colonel A. Nosov, told Tiraspol City Court in writing, in a letter seen by Forum 18, that it was unable to supply a copy of the Directive as it did not have it. However, Colonel Nosov's border guard unit had cited the Directive as the basis for confiscating Jehovah's Witness literature.

Since 2003, Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 that border guards no longer cite the Directive as the basis for confiscating religious literature.

Tiraspol-based Protestant Igor Velikanenko told Forum 18 on 13 November that he went to the Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol on 7 November to try again to recover the Christian magazines confiscated from him as he and some colleagues were about to hand them out to students at the town's university. State Security officials told him that the car confiscated from him has been returned, but that the confiscated literature would not be returned. "They told me to stop bothering them about it," he told Forum 18.

Transdnister is considering a restrictive draft Religion Law, which - if adopted - would stop any new religious communities, unaffiliated to existing registered communities, from gaining legal status for ten years. This would deny them the right to produce and import literature, set up religious colleges, and invite religious workers from outside Transdnister. Independent Protestant congregations or faiths such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are likely to be most affected. But also hard hit is likely to be a newly-established diocese of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (see F18News 31 October 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1041>). (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Transdniester can be found at
<<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=19&results=50>>.

A printer-friendly map of Moldova, including the unrecognised entity of Transdniester, is available at
<<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=moldov>>.

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