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MOLDOVA: Government "should register Muslims", says OSCE

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

The State Service for Religious Communities defied the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in refusing to register a Muslim community in the capital Chisinau, despite a letter from OSCE ambassador William Hill to deputy prime minister Andrei Stratan. "Moldova should register the Muslim communities, in the same way as other religious communities are registered," Claus Neukirch of the OSCE mission in Moldova told Forum 18 News Service. Bishop Antoni (Rudei) leads the six parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in Moldova, which has also been refused registration. He told Forum 18 that since the 6 March elections which saw the return to power of the Communist Party, police agents have been sent to his churches to find out what the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is doing. "This was an excuse to keep us on tenterhooks," the bishop claimed.

The denial of a Muslim community's registration application on 11 July came despite an appeal to Moldova's deputy prime minister from the Mission to Moldova of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The OSCE ambassador, William Hill, wrote to Andrei Stratan on 28 June, the same day that the Spiritual Organisation of Muslims in Moldova headed by Talgat Maseev lodged its application, OSCE mission spokesperson Claus Neukirch told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Chisinau on 26 July. He said the OSCE mission has received no reply. "The Mission has been monitoring several attempts by the Muslim communities to seek official recognition of the Islamic faith and registration of their communities since 2002, and all of them have failed," Neukirch told Forum 18. "Moldova should register the Muslim communities, in the same way as other religious communities are registered."

Another Muslim community led by Mufti Alber Babaev, as well as parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad headed by Bishop Antoni (Rudei) of Beltsy and Moldova, are also barred from registering (see F18News 21 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=613).

Stratan, who is also foreign minister, was unavailable on 26 July, so Forum 18 was unable to find out when he will reply to the OSCE ambassador and what he proposes to say. Yuri Vicion, spokesperson for the foreign ministry, said Forum 18's 21 July written questions - on why the Muslim and Russian Orthodox Church Abroad communities have been repeatedly refused registration and how that accords with Moldova's international human rights commitments - had been passed to the State Service for Religious Communities, which had rejected the applications. "They've not responded," Vicion told Forum 18 on 26 July. "I can't help you any more." He declined to answer any further questions and put the phone down.

Bishop Antoni laments the authorities' repeated denial of registration to the six parishes in Moldova of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. "We can't get land to build new churches and we're told we can't preach because we're not registered," he told Forum 18 on 26 July from the village of Bilicheny Vek in Singerei district near the town of Balti in northern Moldova. "Of course we want registration, so that we can activate our work freely like all other faiths." He says their complaint over denial of registration is still with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Among other difficulties, the bishop cited an occasion in the nearby village of Bilicheny Noi in 2003 when the local administration allocated a plot of land to build a church but, after priests of the Moscow Patriarchate stirred up local people against the presence of a church of his jurisdiction in the village the authorities changed their mind and took back the land.

Bishop Antoni complained that since the 6 March elections, which saw the return to power of the Communist Party, police agents have been sent to his churches - mainly located in private houses - to find out what the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad is doing. "They came to our churches in the week running up to Easter [1 May]," he told Forum 18. "This was an excuse to keep us on tenterhooks," the bishop claimed.

The OSCE mission told Forum 18 that it has discussed the refusal to register any Muslim communities with the State Service on Religious Communities "several times". "The authorities require submission of an additional document confirming the existence of the communities, which is, however, not required by the Law on Religions," Neukirch of the OSCE told Forum 18. "The City Hall therefore refuses to issue this document." He said the mission has also been monitoring Muslim challenges in court of the registration denials.

Neukirch added that in justifying its denials, the State Service for Religious Communities claims that it can only deal with Muslim registration applications after parliament has adopted the new law on religion. The law was approved by the Moldovan government on 27 October 2004 and the draft was sent to Council of Europe for review. At the end of 2004 it received its first reading in parliament, but the process came to a halt because of the 6 March elections. The Council of Europe has declined to discuss the details of its expertise on the draft law with Forum 18, given that the activity is still in process with the Moldovan authorities, but indicated that it presented to the government its latest comments on the draft in the wake of the elections.

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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