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MOLDOVA: Were check-ups aimed at congregations or migrants?

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

Moldova's expulsion of Romanian priests serving in the Bessarabian Orthodox Metropolitanate is part of a campaign of harassment of the Church, Forum 18 News Service has found. The Church also faces check-ups by the police and the Information and Security Service (SIS), as do Orthodox parishes under the Moscow and Kiev Patriarchates. One Jehovah's Witness congregation has also been checked. The authorities insist that the check-ups were to catch illegal immigrants, however leaders of religious communities state that officials were much more interested in the functioning of congregations. More than 60 Bessarabian parish priests have faced intrusive check-ups. Deacon Andrei Deleu of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate told Forum 18 that officers said "they have instructions from the Prime Minister." The Jehovah's Witness congregation asked police to put their reasons in writing. After police were shown their statute specifying that the congregation functions in the district, the police went away.

Moldova's expulsion of Romanian priests serving in the Bessarabian Orthodox Metropolitanate is just a part of a campaign of harassment of the Church, Forum 18 News Service has found. Also facing check-ups have been Orthodox parishes under the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kiev Patriarchate, as well as one Jehovah's Witness congregation. Moldovan authorities insist that the check-ups were to catch illegal immigrants, however leaders of religious communities state that officials were much more interested in the functioning of congregations.

More than 60 Bessarabian parish priests have faced intrusive check-ups from officers of the police and the Information and Security Service (SIS), church members have told Forum 18. Questions related to the jurisdiction and activity of the parish, not just about the status of the priest. Interior Ministry and SIS officials have denied to Forum 18 that the check-ups were intrusive or that they are part of a targeted campaign against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate.

Leaders of other Orthodox and Protestant communities told Forum 18 that they had not faced out-of-the-ordinary checks since early December 2007.

In addition to the expulsions, the campaign against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate - which is an integral part of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate - has also seen continuing attempts to prosecute those protesting against the expulsions (see F18News 4 January 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1067>). This has coincided with harsh anti-Bessarabian Metropolitanate rhetoric from President Vladimir Voronin at home and on visits to Brussels and Moscow (see forthcoming F18News article).

Several Bessarabian priests have told Forum 18 that check-ups started in early December and appear to be continuing. "The Interior Ministry sent police officers to check up on how our parishes function and whether they have registration," Deacon Andrei Deleu, the Bessarabian Metropolitanate's head of chancellery, told Forum 18 on 23 January. "Some of the check-ups went on for up to two hours." He told Forum 18 that officers said "they have instructions from the Prime Minister."

Fr Deleu said the check-ups began in Ungheni District of central Moldova, where some thirty parishes transferred their allegiance from the Moscow Patriarchate to the Bessarabian Metropolitanate in 2006. The check-ups then spread to parishes in other parts of Moldova, with the most recent in Hincesti District south-west of the capital on about 21 January. He added that police never told parish priests if they found anything.

One Bessarabian priest who serves a parish in Ungheni District, Fr Ioan Porcescu, told Forum 18 that when he received a visit on 21 December the local policeman - whom he already knew - was accompanied by another man. "The policeman introduced him as an officer of the SIS who had come from Chisinau," Fr Porcescu told Forum 18 on 23 January. "He didn't show any identity card." He said the SIS officer asked all the questions, noting the answers on a one-page form.

Fr Porcescu said the "most important question" for the officer was which Orthodox jurisdiction he belonged to. He said he also asked what permission he and the parish had from the local administration chief, what citizenship he had, who had allowed him to serve as parish priest, and what fire equipment the church building had.

Fr Porcescu said the visit lasted some 20 minutes and was "not pleasant" because of what he regarded as the unwarranted and

intrusive questions. He told Forum 18 that about 30 local Bessarabian priests had received such visits.

Also complaining of police check-ups is Bishop Filaret (Pancu), who leads the diocese in Moldova of the Kiev Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He said his Church has two monasteries and seven other churches in Moldova. He said such check-ups took place throughout 2007, but had not increased at the end of the year or early this year. "The police often call our priests in for no reason," he told Forum 18 on 17 January. "There are constant questions, insults and threats." Police have hesitated to interrupt services, but often arrive during a service and wait till the end to speak to the priest.

Bishop Filaret said that in early January the authorities threatened to open a criminal case against him, accusing him of taking donations made to his Church for his personal gain. "Of course this is not true. People have given money voluntarily and we spend it on Church work."

Fr Vadim Cheibas of the Moldovan Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate told Forum 18 that their parishes have also faced check-ups recently. These are the first such check-ups he could recall over many years. "They were conducted by the police, not the SIS," he told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 23 January. "All they were interested in was the status of the priest - if he had authorisation to live and work here. That's quite normal. If they're Romanian citizens they shouldn't work here. It was not about the church nor about the parish." He says his Church has about ten foreign priests, all of whom have work and residence permits.

The only non-Orthodox religious community known to have faced such a check-up since early December was one Jehovah's Witness congregation in a village in the northern Riscani District. "The local policeman, citing orders from a senior district officer, asked our local leader [who is a Moldovan citizen] in mid-January where the community meets and asked him to show a document proving that it is acting legally in the district," Anatoly Cravciuc of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 23 January.

He said the local leader telephoned him in the capital Chisinau and he then spoke to the policeman, asking him to put his reasons for seeking this information in writing. Cravciuc pointed out to Forum 18 that no permission is required in law for religious communities to meet. After the local leader showed police their statute specifying that the congregation functions in the district, the police went away.

Bessarabian Church members also alleged to Forum 18 that at least two local people suspected by the authorities of organising street demonstration in the southern Cahul District in early January to protest against the banishment of the Romanian priests received intimidatory visits from SIS officers. However, the mayor of the village of Vadul-lui-Isac, Alexandru Besliu - who supports the local Bessarabian parish's complaints - insisted to Forum 18 on 18 January that the warnings came from the police, not the SIS.

Human rights activist and lawyer Ion Manole, who heads the Chisinau-based group Promo-Lex, believes the SIS has been involved in attempts to intimidate Bessarabian priests and parishioners. "The SIS doesn't give its views publicly - it just does what the authorities tell it to do," he told Forum 18 on 18 January. "It is bad - they too should abide by the law. They should refuse to fulfil such instructions."

The SIS categorically denied to Forum 18 that it had been involved in any check-ups or warnings. "Questions of religion and religious denominations do not fall within the competence of the SIS. So SIS officials are not engaged in any measures of any kind against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate or its clergy," Vitalie Burzakovsky, spokesperson for the agency, told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 25 January. "We act solely in accordance with the law and in all its activity the Service respects the rights and freedoms of the individual."

Alla Melica, spokesperson for the Interior Ministry (which controls the police but not the SIS), insisted that the check-ups on the Bessarabian priests were part of wider "prophylactic measures" to check up on illegal immigrants to "protect citizens during the holiday period". "As a result of the check-ups we uncovered some 115 foreign citizens of various nationalities illegally present in the Republic of Moldova," she told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 23 January. "Among them were three Romanian citizens working as priests."

Melica insisted that no information on the way parishes functioned was collected. "Police only asked questions related to foreign citizens," she told Forum 18. "We don't have records as to who is or is not a Bessarabian priest." Told by Forum 18 about what Bessarabian priests insist were intrusive and unwarranted questions, she responded: "No-one has complained to us."

The police chief of Cahul District also denied that check-ups were targeted at the Bessarabian parishes. Two Romanian priests served there before being barred from Moldova in late December, and two others in the district are threatened with expulsion, "All organisations and religious entities where foreigners might have been were checked," Dimitrie Ciocin told Forum 18 on 28 January. He denied absolutely that he had received any order "from above" to conduct the check-ups or that the SIS had been involved. "Each district police is independent." He also denied that any questions were asked about anything other than individuals' right to live and work in Moldova. (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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