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MOLDOVA: Christmas expulsions of four Romanian Orthodox priests

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

Four Romanian Orthodox Church priests are being expelled from Moldova as their Bessarabian Orthodox Metropolitanate prepares to celebrate Christmas on 7 January, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Two parishes have been deprived of priests as Fr Ion Bigea and Fr Constantin Dumitrascu were denied entry to Moldova when they tried to return to their parishes, in Fr Bigea's case after earlier being fined. Two more priests, Fr Iulian Budescu and Fr Ion Tivlea, also face expulsion. Fr Budescu has been told by the authorities that he must leave by 6 January. Fr Tivlea has been told that he must leave after a trial for administrative offences on 9 January. Human rights activist Ion Manole, of Promo-Lex, told Forum 18 that "this was specially done close to the Christmas holiday when non-governmental organisations and the media are not working. They [Moldovan authorities] chose this period deliberately."

As members of the Bessarabian Orthodox Metropolitanate - part of the Romanian Patriarchate - prepare to celebrate Christmas on 7 January, two of their parishes have already been deprived of their priests, church members have told Forum 18 News Service. The two priests - Romanian citizens - were invited from Romania by the Metropolitanate. "He's our priest and we want him to be allowed to return," a parishioner of one of the priests, Fr Ion Bigea, told Forum 18 on 3 January from the village of Vadul-lui-Isac in the southern Cahul District. "He's served here for nearly fourteen years. No-one knows where these problems have suddenly come from." Another church member in the village told Forum 18: "We don't know if he'll be back with us for Christmas. Otherwise it will be no festival for us."

As well as Fr Bigea, Fr Constantin Dumitrascu who served in the village of Larga in Cahul District has also been denied reentry to Moldova after a visit to Romania. Two more priests in Cahul District who are Romanian citizens - Fr Iulian Budescu and Fr Ion Tivlea - face expulsion as Moldovan government hostility to the Metropolitanate steps up. Fr Budescu has been told by the authorities that he must leave by 6 January. Fr Tivlea has been told that he will be required to leave after being tried for administrative offences on 9 January. Fr Bigea and Fr Budescu have also been fined for living and working in Moldova illegally.

Human rights activist and lawyer Ion Manole, who heads the Chisinau-based group Promo-Lex, said that the Romanian priests had committed some violations over their residence and work in Moldova. "But it is clear to everyone that there is an instruction from above," he told Forum 18 on 3 January. "This was specially done close to the Christmas holiday when non-governmental organisations and the media are not working. They chose this period deliberately."

Romanian citizens do not need visa to enter Moldova, but under new rules can only stay for 90 days in any six month period without a residence permit. Work also requires a work permit. However, while conceding that most of the Romanian priests working in the Bessarabian Metropolitanate do not have these permits, Deacon Andrei Deleu, its head of chancellery, insists this was just a pretext. "No-one bothered about this before over many years," he told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 3 January. "Then suddenly this comes up. They then tried to get these permits and officials wouldn't accept the applications."

Fr Deleu said that seven of the Metropolitanate's approximately 200 priests are from Romania and do not have Moldovan citizenship. He said the Metropolitanate has some 186 parishes across Moldova. He added that while the Romanian Patriarchate follows the New Calendar, celebrating Christmas on 25 December, most of the Bessarabian parishes in Moldova use the Old Calendar, celebrating Christmas on 7 January.

The rival Moldovan Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate - led by Metropolitan Vladimir - is much larger, with an estimated 1,250 parishes in the country.

Fr Bigea's parishioner in Vadul-lui-Isac - who asked not to be identified - said the priest's problems began in mid-December, when a police officer turned up at the village church during the Sunday service. The officer insisted that he wanted to talk to the priest personally and waited till the end of the service. He then told Fr Bigea that he had to accompany him to the police station in the town of Cahul. "There he was told that he was living and working here illegally," the parishioner told Forum 18.

"Fr Ion has a work contract with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, but not with the state. Over nearly fourteen years, no-one ever asked him for a residence permit or a work permit," the parishioner told Forum 18. "Then when the problems started he went to apply they said applications would not be accepted until after 8 January, when Christmas holidays finish."

A court case was scheduled for 21 December, but it was postponed until 24 December. Then he was fined 600 Moldovan Lei (283 Norwegian Kroner, 36 Euros or 53 US Dollars) for illegally living and working in Moldova. Fr Bigea went back to Romania for a few days to visit his family, and it was on his attempted return on 29 December that border guards barred his return. The parishioner reported that he tried again on 3 January, but in vain.

The parishioner says that some 80 people attend the small village church, which Fr Bigea had built. "More attend on feasts like Easter, where they spill outside - the church is too small." A new church is now being built.

Several parishioners told Forum 18 that several hundred villagers held a demonstration on 2 January, blocking the Cahul-Giurgiulesti highway (which ends at Moldova's only port, Giurgiulesti, on the River Danube). "Some were calm, some more passionate, but the demonstration was not aggressive," one of the demonstrators told Forum 18 on 3 January. "All of us want our priest to return."

A meeting at the village administration drew up petitions which were faxed to Moldova's President Vladimir Voronin, parliament and government agencies. Participants told Forum 18 that village mayor Alexandru Besliu supports the return of Fr Bigea. Officials promised to respond by 3 pm the following day, 3 January, but those who arrived at the village administration then said no decision could be taken until after the Christmas holidays were over.

"The deputy head of Cahul District has told us we should accept another priest," the second parishioner told Forum 18. "But we refused."

One of the two priests threatened with expulsion is Fr Budescu, who serves in the village of Manta. According to a court record seen by Forum 18, he was fined 640 Lei (302 Norwegian Kroner, 38 Euros or 56 US Dollars) on 24 December for violating Article 191/1 part 1 and 192/1 part 2 of the Code of Administrative Violations for living and working in Moldova without permits. However, he was acquitted of violating Article 200 part 5, which punishes religiously-based political activity. He was given ten days to appeal against the ruling.

The court record notes that Fr Budescu had worked as parish priest since 2004. However, he told the court that when the law changed requiring permits, no-one had told him of the changes. He said he believed his October 2004 work contract with the Bessarabian Metropolitanate was sufficient. He added that when he went to Chisinau in December 2007 to try to get the permits he was told he could not lodge an application because court proceedings were underway. Officials told him this was an order "from superiors".

A 28 December order signed by Police Major Ghenadie Timbalist of the Group to Combat Illegal Migration and Asylum, which Forum 18 has seen, notes that Fr Budescu's passport was checked on 9 December (a Sunday), when violations of the law were discovered. The order terminated his right to remain in Moldova, instructed the Migration and Asylum Directorate not to issue him with a work permit and ordered the Border Guard Service not to allow him entry into Moldova "for the prescribed period". The ban has been set at three years.

No-one from the Interior Ministry was available to tell Forum 18 why the Romanian priests were suddenly facing these problems. Ghenadie Palii, head of its International Relations Department, refused to discuss the issue with Forum 18 on 4 January, referring all questions to the Ministry's press office. However, the telephone there went unanswered on 3 and 4 January. Palii said officials are on Christmas holiday until 8 January.

The telephone of President Voronin's spokesperson, Natalia Visanu, went unanswered on 3 and 4 January. The telephones of the Foreign Ministry's press office also went unanswered, and Forum 18's written questions sent on 3 January had not been answered by lunchtime on 4 January.

A spokesperson for the Romanian embassy in Chisinau told Forum 18 on 4 January that it was making no comment on the problems of the Romanian priests.

The moves against the Romanian priests came at the same time as what the Metropolitanate claims was a deliberate move to harass its leader, Metropolitan Petru Paduraru. After travelling to Iasi in Romania to join Christmas services on 25 December with the Romanian Patriarch, Metropolitan Petru crossed the border back into Moldova on 26 December. "Although he has a Romanian diplomatic passport, Metropolitan Petru was held up for two hours and searched as though he were a drug smuggler," Fr Deleu complained to Forum 18. "This is a violation of the Vienna Conventions governing the treatment of diplomats."

Metropolitan Petru was held up when border guards claimed their computer was not working and that he would have to await the arrival of officials from Chisinau. After 45 minutes a car arrived from the capital. Seven customs officials then searched all his

luggage and required him to fill in a form declaring that he was not carrying drugs.

Other travellers told Forum 18 that normal processing times at border crossings with Romania is about ten minutes.

Both Fr Deleu of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate and human rights activist Manole are among many who link the moves against the Metropolitanate to the statement by President Voronin on national television on 30 November condemning the decision by the Romanian Orthodox Church to reactivate three dioceses in Moldova to add to the one existing diocese based in Chisinau. "It is the same provocative scheme against us, against the independence, sovereignty, against the country, identity and people," Voronin declared. "We cannot bargain our faith and we cannot make it the prisoner of our politics, indifferently of the way it looks: clever, bad, good, idiot."

Voronin threatened to revoke the official registration of the Bessarabian Metropolitanate, which had only been achieved in 2001 in the wake of a fine imposed on Moldova by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. Church members and human rights activists have pointed out to Forum 18 that only a court can revoke legal status, not the president.

Parliamentary deputy Vitalia Pavlicenco, who heads the National Liberal Party, believes the latest moves against the Bessarabian Metropolitanate are "part of the attack from Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate that goes together with political circles in Moscow". She told Forum 18 on 4 January that she fears the expulsion of the Bessarabian priests will set those who favour closer ties with Romania against those who favour ties with Moscow.

"President Voronin wants to be with the pro-Russian Metropolitan Vladimir of Chisinau and Moldova and Patriarch Alexy of Moscow, who don't want to take the Moldovan Republic out of the influence of Russia in the religious sphere." Pavlicenco indicated her support for those calling for the priests to be allowed to remain in Moldova.

Moldova has arbitrarily denied registration, and hence legal status, to religious communities the authorities dislike. Without legal status, religious communities cannot carry out a wide range of peaceful religious activities. This has led to two large fines being imposed on the country by the ECHR in Strasbourg. Some hoped that a new Religion Law would resolve these problems. It was promulgated by President Voronin on 2 August 2007 and came into force on 17 August on its official publication. However, Serghei Ostaf of the Resource Centre for Human Rights told Forum 18 in August 2007 that "nothing functions in Moldova as it is supposed to. Officials are very creative in finding obstructions, when they don't want to do something" (see F18News 6 August 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1003>).

The Law created a new Directorate of Religious Organisations within the Justice Ministry, to register religious communities. However, as of December 2007 the Directorate was still being formed and had only two staff. The Directorate has the task of drawing up regulations to elaborate the practical workings of the Religion Law.

Some religious minorities - including all Muslim communities, smaller Orthodox churches and many Protestant churches - fear that the new Law will be used to continue restrictions on their activity (see F18News 3 August 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1002>). (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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