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RUSSIA: Mixed visa fortunes for foreign Catholic clergy

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The visa situation for foreign Catholic clergy in Russia is mixed, Forum 18 News Service has found, with the length of visas granted varying from region to region. Some regions have a positive attitude to Catholic clergy, with others having a decidedly negative attitude, head of the Catholic Church in Russia Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz citing differing visa restrictions as being among the main problems faced by Catholic clergy in Russia. Foreign clergy are important for the Catholic Church in Russia, as there are only a relatively small number of ordained Russian nationals. This is because only two Catholic parishes and no seminaries were allowed to function in Soviet times. Priests in different regions have told Forum 18 that what they describe as "the human factor," rather than the law, is important in determining the length of visa they receive. None of the seven Catholic clergy denied entry to Russia since the beginning of 2001 have been able to return, but no more have been expelled.

"My main occupation here is applying for visas," Polish Catholic parish priest Fr Krzysztof Goik remarked to Forum 18 News Service in the southern Russian city of Krasnodar in late September. While their fellow foreign priests in other areas of southern Russia receive visas for one year at a time, he explained, those in Krasnodar region have to leave Russia every three months. According to Fr Krzysztof, it takes at least three weeks for him to go and obtain a new visa in Poland. "The lack of continuity is impossible, to say nothing of the cost," he told Forum 18.

Contacted by Forum 18 on 29 October, the leading religious affairs official for Krasnodar region gave assurances that this situation would "soon be resolved positively." In addition, however, Aleksandr Babskov emphasised that the three-month visa restriction was "entirely within the law".

On 18 November another Polish priest in Krasnodar region reported that the visa situation had indeed become "a little better" since Forum 18's visit, as Fr Krzysztof and another four foreign priests in Krasnodar region had recently received six-month visas. Fr Marek Kujda added, however, that his own visa and those of two Polish nuns assisting him at the Church of SS Peter and Paul in the Black Sea resort of Tuapse were for only three months. Like Fr Krzysztof, Fr Marek complained to Forum 18 of the impediment to parish worship caused by continual visa applications. He was optimistic, however, that his next visa – expected in January 2005 – would be valid for six months.

At St Laboria's Catholic Church in Krasnodar, Fr Krzysztof told Forum 18 that he had first been promised a six-month visa after Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Alvaro Gil-Robles raised the issue with regional officials during the summer. Characterising the regional authorities' relations with the local Catholic representatives as "either cool or non-existent" – with the exception of the resort of Sochi – Fr Krzysztof added that his parish had been given no option but to build at the very edge of Krasnodar city. Quite apart from his frequent absence, he told Forum 18, this factor made it very difficult for his 250 regular parishioners to attend worship: "Some of the grandmothers get up at 5 am to come to Mass."

A particularly negative attitude by the Krasnodar authorities towards Catholic activity is suggested by an item in the June-July 2002 edition of "Orthodox Kuban," a monthly newspaper printed with the blessing of local Metropolitan Isidor (Kirichenko) of Yekaterinodar and Kuban. Attributed to "operational reports by Krasnodar regional FSB," it states that Catholic representatives in the region are engaged in a wide-ranging Vatican-sponsored plan to cause a schism within the Russian Orthodox Church, destabilise Russian society and so create conditions for an overthrow of the state.

Addressing a 27 May 2004 Russian parliamentary hearing concerning legislation on religious organisations, head of the Catholic Church in Russia Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz cited different visa restrictions among the main problems faced by largely foreign Catholic personnel in Russia. The small number of Russian nationals among Catholic clergy is due to the fact that, after a policy of persecution, the Soviet state permitted only two Catholic parishes and no seminaries to function in Russia.

The picture is indeed varied. Forum 18 has already reported on visa restrictions encountered by Catholic clergy in the Russian Far East (see F18News 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342). Speaking to Forum 18 in the Urals region in July 2004, Catholic parish priest in Tobolsk Fr Jaroslaw Mitrzak said that Tyumen regional authorities had switched to granting him three-month rather than one-year visas in early 2004. His fellow Polish priest in Tyumen city, Fr Leszek Hryciuk reported by contrast that the authorities were now once again offering him the possibility of a one-year visa after issuing several extendable

three-month visas. Both priests commented upon a generally positive attitude towards the Catholic Church in Tyumen region, pointing out that many local people are at least partly descended from Polish or German exiles. Fr Jaroslaw, Fr Leszek and Fr Krzysztof in Krasnodar all stressed to Forum 18 that "the human factor" rather than the law was paramount in determining the length of visa they received.

While none of the seven Catholic clergy known to have been denied entry to Russia since the beginning of 2001 has been able to return, no more have been reported expelled. A Catholic source has told Forum 18, however, that one of the seven - Slovak Fr Stanislav Krajnak - received a visa this year but was summoned back to the Russian embassy within hours for it to be cancelled.

Soon after rumours that Fr Jerzy Steckiewicz faced obstruction for unspecified reasons of state security on entering the western Kaliningrad region in late October 2004, Forum 18 was however told by Fr Jerzy himself from Kaliningrad that he hoped to obtain registration in the region shortly. While Monsignor Ante Jozic at the nunciature in Moscow told Forum 18 on 10 November that Fr Jerzy had indeed recently encountered problems with Kaliningrad visa department on entering the region, he was also confident that the situation – about which he declined to elaborate - would soon be resolved. Forum 18 has so far been unable to obtain a response from either religious affairs officials or the passport and visa department in Kaliningrad region.

Another Polish Catholic priest in Kaliningrad region, Fr Dariusz Jankiewicz told Forum 18 on 3 November that, while he holds a one-year visa, he receives registration for only one month at a time. He added that he knew of at least one fellow priest in Kaliningrad region who is unable to obtain registration (which is mandatory within three working days of arrival in Russia) and therefore travels to and from neighbouring Poland every three days. (END)

For background information see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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