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TURKMENISTAN: Citizenship moves "will not affect Russian Orthodox"?

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Officials of the Russian Orthodox Church – the only Christian Church allowed to register in Turkmenistan – have told Forum 18 News Service that the unilateral decision by the Turkmen leader to abolish the right to hold joint Turkmen and Russian citizenship will not affect the functioning of the Church, although membership of the Church is almost entirely made up of ethnic Russians. "There really is a problem with the abolition of dual citizenship," Father Ioan Kopach of Ashgabad's St Aleksandr Nevsky cathedral told Forum 18. "But if people ask us about it, all we can do is shrug our shoulders. It's not a religious issue. I am sure that just as before we will be able to receive religious literature without hindrance and travel to Russia." But one activist Vyacheslav Mamedov says abolition of dual citizenship will "of course" affect Turkmen Orthodox. "It will be more difficult for them to integrate with Orthodox culture and visit places of pilgrimage in their historic homeland."

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On 22 April Turkmen president Saparmurad Niyazov signed a decree "On the settling of issues connected with the cessation of dual nationality between Turkmenistan and the Russian Federation". According to the decree persons with dual Turkmen-Russian citizenship with permanent residence in Turkmenistan must within two months choose the citizenship of one of the countries and inform the Turkmen Ministry of Internal Affairs of their decision. Those who fail to communicate their decision by 22 June will be considered citizens of Turkmenistan (i.e. they will lose Russian citizenship). Persons with dual citizenship living outside Turkmenistan must confirm their citizenship at a Turkmen consulate abroad. Otherwise they will lose their citizenship, except for those who are being sought "for crimes they have committed".

Niyazov issued his decree not long after he and Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a protocol on 10 April annulling the agreement regulating matters of dual citizenship.

Vyacheslav Mamedov, an active member of the Russian community in the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), puts the number of Russian speakers in Turkmenistan at about 200,000, of whom about half have dual citizenship. The vast majority of Russian speakers in Turkmenistan are of Orthodox background.

The Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan, which forms part of the Central Asian diocese with headquarters in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, has 13 parishes. The diocese is led by Archbishop Vladimir (Ikim).

A leading figure in the Orthodox Church in Turkmenistan is Fr Andrei Sapunov, who is not only a priest but one of the deputy chairmen of the government's Gengeshi (Council) for Religious Affairs, where he has played a role in preventing the registration of other Christian denominations. Forum 18 was unable to reach him as he was on a visit to Moscow.

Orthodox officials in Moscow were uncertain of the impact on their Church of the abolition of dual citizenship. "It is hard for me to comment on the Turkmen president's decree," Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, deputy chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, told Forum 18 on 27 May. "We fully trust our Central Asian diocese and I think you would be better to contact them. I can only say that we hope that a compromise can be found that will be acceptable to Turkmen Orthodox."

Archpriest Nikolai, spokesman for the Central Asian diocese, told Forum 18 in Tashkent on 27 May that the 13 parishes in Turkmenistan have 15 priests. "They are all Turkmen citizens, but unfortunately we don't have any information about how many of

them have dual citizenship." He reported that "in a few days" Archbishop Vladimir will travel to Ashgabad and will discuss the problems of local Orthodox with the Turkmen authorities. Archpriest Nikolai promised to report back to Forum 18 after 5 June.

Mamedov believes the abolition of dual citizenship will "of course" affect Turkmen Orthodox. "It will be more difficult for them to integrate with Orthodox culture and visit places of pilgrimage in their historic homeland," he told Forum 18 From Turkmenbashi on 27 May.

But he insisted that the situation with Niyazov's decree "should not be over-dramatised". "The law is not retroactive and Russia has no intention of removing citizenship from citizens of Turkmenistan who already have Russian citizenship." He believes the main problem for people with dual citizenship "is that they will no longer be able to travel freely to Russia". After 22 June Turkmenistan will no longer recognise the Russian passports of Turkmen citizens, so to travel to Russia they will need both a Turkmen exit visa and a Russian entry visa. "However, citizens of Turkmenistan who have not renounced Russian citizenship, will, of course, not be able to obtain a Russian visa," he told Forum 18. "Persons with dual citizenship will have to get a visa from a third country, for example Azerbaijan, and travel to Russia from there."

Despite Fr Kopach's claim that Orthodox will be able to continue to receive church publications, a blanket decree banning residents of Turkmenistan from subscribing to Russian publications and receiving them by mail, enacted in June last year, bars subscriptions from Turkmenistan to the Orthodox Church's main journal, the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, and other church publications from Russia. However, some copies of Orthodox journals do reach the country, apparently brought in by individual priests.

Russian Orthodox laypeople have reported the difficulties for the Orthodox Church of operating in authoritarian Turkmenistan. One parishioner told Forum 18 on condition of anonymity that at the end of the 1990s the police started to patrol the area around the church "literally counting the people attending services". From the end of 2000 the local priest reportedly received instructions to quote from the president's book Ruhnama in his sermons and to "preach to us about the virtues of living in Turkmenistan and of the policies of Turkmenbashi [an official title for the president]", the parishioner reported. The priest was prohibited from working independently of the government and the church was prevented from getting involved in wider cultural activities.

After complaining to a fellow parishioner at comments made about the happiness of living in Turkmenistan by the priest in the Christmas 1999 service, the parishioner was followed out of church by two men who had been behind the parishioner. They forced the parishioner into a car and took the parishioner to the police station, where the parishioner claims to have been put in solitary confinement and beaten. The parishioner was warned about imprisonment if there were any further political remarks in church.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY