

5 September 2003

TRANSDNIESTER: Methodists live "twilight existence," leader claims

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The two Methodist congregations in the separatist republic of Transdniestria in eastern Moldova live a twilight existence, their leader reports. "We can't rent anywhere for services and we can't afford to buy property. We have to meet semi-legally in private flats," Dmitri Hantil told Forum 18 News Service. He said their local registration applications in 1997 and again in 2000 had stalled as they refused to pay a bribe of at least 500 US dollars sought by Pyotr Zalozhkov, the commissioner of religion and cults. Forum 18 tried to reach Zalozhkov but his phone went unanswered. The Methodists have also sought registration with the Moldovan authorities – so far in vain.

After numerous registration applications and its refusal to pay a bribe to acquire registration, the two Methodist congregations in the separatist republic of Transdniestria in eastern Moldova live a twilight existence, their leader reports. "We can't rent anywhere for services and we can't afford to buy property. We have to meet semi-legally in private flats," Dmitri Hantil told Forum 18 News Service from the town of Bendery (Tighina) on 3 September. "The authorities don't want us here."

Hantil reported that the Methodists had applied for registration with the separatist authorities in Tiraspol in 1997 and again, twice, in 2000. He visited Pyotr Zalozhkov, the commissioner of religion and cults who reports to the president of the unrecognised entity, Igor Smirnov. "Zalozhkov personally indicated to me indirectly that we should pay a bribe." The bribe being sought was of at least 500 US dollars, Hantil claimed. "If we had paid he would doubtless have registered us." However, Hantil refused to pay and the application has stalled since then.

The registration denial came despite a visit to Zalozhkov in early 2000 by the head of the United Methodist Church in Eurasia, Bishop Rudiger Minor, when the two had held friendly discussions and the Methodists hoped that registration would follow.

Hantil alleged to Forum 18 that local Adventist and Hare Krishna community leaders had admitted to him that they had paid bribes to Zalozhkov to achieve registration in Transdniestria. "They didn't say how much, but it must have been something in the order of 500 dollars or more." Forum 18 was unable to reach Adventist and Hare Krishna leaders immediately to discover whether they had paid such bribes or not.

Neither Zalozhkov nor his assistant Tamara Kovalchuk answered the phone at their office in Tiraspol on 3, 4 or 5 September, so Forum 18 was unable to establish whether Zalozhkov had indeed sought a bribe in exchange for registration from the Methodists, the Adventists and the Hare Krishna community. Nor was it able to discover what was holding up the Methodists' registration, given that Transdniestria's 1995 religion law requires only ten founding members for a religious community, a criterion the Methodists clearly meet.

The Methodists have also tried to register – so far in vain – with the central government in the Moldovan capital Chisinau, whose authority over Transdniestria the Tiraspol authorities do not recognise. Hantil said they had lodged their application with the State Service for the Affairs of Cults in July of this year. "At first they said the application looked OK, then they came back to us and said the statute had been written in accordance with the old religion law and needed amending to bring it into line with the new law," Hantil told Forum 18. "It was not a complete refusal."

An official of the State Service for the Affairs of Cults told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 4 September that Tatyana Martin, the official who had been handling the Methodists' application, was away on leave. Another official Gheorghe Armasu told Forum 18 that he knew nothing about the Methodists' registration application. "They exist only on the left-bank," he declared, referring to Transdniestria, which is situated on the left bank of the Dniester river.

However, Armasu added that Moldova's new religion law had not yet been adopted. "It is still being considered by the Ministry of Justice and only then will it be presented to the government and then to parliament," he declared from Chisinau on 4 September. He said he did not know whether the State Service was currently registering religious communities or whether all new applications have been suspended until the new law is adopted.

The Bendery Methodist congregation has some 40 adult members, while the Tiraspol congregation has some 65 adult members, Hantil told Forum 18. The Methodists also have an office in Chisinau.

Asked whether registration by the central government in Chisinau would be enough for the Transdnier authorities, Hantil responded: "No. We need to be registered there and here." However, he noted that pressure on Transdnier's Methodists has eased since international publicity about their plight. "KGB threats and raids on our churches have ceased since this publicity, but we can't do anything public." He said the Chisinau authorities are "a lot better" than those in Tiraspol.

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