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CRIMEA: Six weeks until Catholic parish loses priest?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The Catholic parish in the Crimean capital Simferopol appears to be about to lose its parish priest, a Polish citizen, just as 18 of the Muftiate's invited Turkish imams have already been forced to leave. The residence permit of Fr Piotr Rosochacki – who has served in Crimea for more than five years – expires on 25 October and Russia's Federal Migration Service has verbally refused to extend it and that of a Polish Catholic nun which expires in December. Crimea's Chief Prosecutor, Natalya Poklonskaya, promised to investigate, though her assistant told Forum 18 that it is "too early" to expect results. Asked why Fr Rosochacki's residence permit was not simply extended as it had been on previous occasions, Yana Smolova of Russia's Federal Migration Service in Crimea responded: "That was under Ukrainian law. Now we are a different country."

Following the enforced departure of 18 of the 23 Turkish imams and religious teachers who have long served Crimea's Muslim community, the peninsula's foreign Roman Catholic priests and nuns may be next. Russia's Federal Migration Service has verbally refused to extend the residence permits of Fr Piotr Rosochacki and a nun, both Polish citizens. "I have served here in Crimea for more than five years and mine is the first to run out," parish priest Fr Rosochacki told Forum 18 News Service from the Crimean capital Simferopol on 9 September. "My residence permit expires on 25 October and I have very little time left."

As well as the foreign Muslim and Catholic religious leaders, other non-Ukrainian and non-Russian citizens serving Crimea's religious communities include two rabbis, as well as the most senior of the three Armenian Apostolic priests, Fr Mkhitar Grigoryan.

Since Russia controversially annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March – an annexation not recognised by the international community – Russia has insisted that its laws apply on the peninsula.

A wide range of Crimea's religious communities have complained to Forum 18 of the burden of having to seek re-registration under Russian law if they wish to retain legal status, as well as the lack of information about how to go about it. Many also fear that they might not be able to get it or that they might have to distort their structures in order to do so (see F18News 10 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1995).

Catholic priests and nuns

Crimea's Roman Catholic community has 12 priests in Crimea (eight Polish and four Ukrainian citizens). In addition they have eight sisters (five Ukrainian, one Latvian and two Polish citizens).

Fr Rosochacki is serving as priest of Simferopol's Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish at the invitation of the Odessa and Simferopol Roman Catholic diocese. He lodged his application to extend his residence permit to the Crimean branch of Russia's Federal Migration Service in Simferopol in the second half of August. "They told me verbally that the application was being refused," he told Forum 18. "I asked them to put this in writing."

However, the 3 September written response from the head of the Crimean branch of Russia's Federal Migration Service, Pyotr Yarosh, does not directly reject the application. "The letter says they recommend that the application be lodged at a later date," Fr Rosochacki lamented. "It gives no reason or explanation."

He said that in late August – after the verbal rejection - he had written to the Federal Migration Service in Moscow, but they had responded to say the letter had been forwarded to their Simferopol branch and that he would be invited for a discussion. "Nothing has happened – I've not been invited," Fr Rosochacki noted.

A Simferopol-based Polish Catholic nun, Sister Irena Olszak, was told verbally when she lodged her application to extend her residence permit that it would be rejected, Fr Rosochacki added. "She has not yet received any response in writing." Her residence permit expires on 16 December.

"Now we are a different country"

Fr Rosochacki raised the residence permit denials to foreign Catholic representatives at the 4 September meeting in Simferopol of Crimea's Inter-Religious Council. The meeting was attended by the acting head of the Russian-backed Crimean government, Sergei Aksyonov, as well as Crimea's Chief Prosecutor, Natalya Poklonskaya.

In response, Poklonskaya promised to investigate the issue, the c-inform.info news website noted the same day. "We will look into this and give a reasoned response," she said, noting that Prosecutor's Office officials had already met Catholic priests to discuss their concerns.

Aksyonov said that when issuing residence permits to foreign citizens, there should be "no religious subtext". "In no way can the absence of the necessity for creating parishes of the Roman Catholic Church on the territory of Crimea be a basis [for such refusals]," c-inform.info quotes him as declaring. "I promise you that such questions will not be raised at all. If people want to carry out service in the Roman Catholic Church, there will be no bans from the authorities."

Yana Smolova, spokesperson for Russia's Federal Migration Service in Crimea, told Forum 18 on 10 September she had no information about Fr Rosochacki's residence permit denial. But she once again insisted that the Migration Service works according to the requirements of Russian law. Asked why Fr Rosochacki's residence permit was not simply extended as it had been on previous occasions, she responded: "That was under Ukrainian law. Now we are a different country."

Natalya Boyarkina, senior assistant to Prosecutor Poklonskaya, told Forum 18 on 10 September that as the promise to investigate Fr Rosochacki's concerns had been made only on 4 September, it was "too early" to expect any results. "It's not even a week," she noted.

Five Turkish imams and teachers remain

The Federal Migration Service similarly refused to extend the residence permits of 18 of the 23 Turkish imams and teachers who had been serving in Crimea under a programme that had existed for two decades. The leader of the programme – the representative in Crimea of Turkey's Diyanet (the state-backed body with oversight over the Muslim community), Mevlut Seyhan – was forced to leave on 13 August. Officials told the Muftiate it could not invite any foreign citizens until it has gained registration under Russian law (see F18News 3 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992).

Smolova, spokesperson of the Federal Migration Service in Crimea, had defended the enforced departure of the Turkish imams and religious teachers. She told Forum 18 then that they would have to apply for visas for Russia in their home country (see F18News 3 September 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992).

The residence permits of the five remaining Turkish imams and religious teachers expire in November and December. "They will remain at work here until their residence permits expire," Jemil Bibishev, the official of the Muftiate involved in overseeing the foreign visitors, told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 10 September. "As soon as we get our [the Muftiate's] registration documents we will begin the process of inviting them again."

Three months in, one month out

Crimea's Greek Catholic priests (all Ukrainian citizens) were told when they filled in Russian migration cards on arrival that they can stay for only three months at a time and will have to then leave for at least one month. "This will be very inconvenient," an Exarchate member complained to Forum 18 in June (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

No other religious communities have complained to Forum 18 that their clergy – whether Ukrainian citizens or from other countries – have been restricted to three months in any four in Crimea. (END)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Crimea can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=86>.

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