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GEORGIA: Orthodox permission needed for religious literature imports

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

Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service that importing religious literature can be difficult and expensive, or even impossible, due both to obstruction from the Orthodox Patriarchate and also to corruption amongst officials. There is repeatedly said to be an unpublished instruction to Customs officials from Patriarch Ilya banning the religious literature imports without his permission. Giorgi Andriadze of the Patriarchate told Forum 18 that the Patriarchate only objects to large quantities of non-Orthodox literature being imported. "It's a question of proselytism. If groups bring in millions of books, that means they intend to proselytise. If they bring in enough for their own followers, it's their right." The Armenian Apostolic and Jewish communities have not had any problems with literature importation.

Religious minorities report that importing religious books into Georgia can be difficult and expensive, or impossible without the blessing of the Orthodox Patriarchate. Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimitia told Forum 18 News Service that on 21 June 1999 Patriarch Ilya wrote to the head of Customs Inspection warning that "the distribution of foreign literature should be banned".

However, Giorgi Andriadze, parliamentary secretary of the Orthodox Patriarchate, maintains that the Patriarchate only objects to large quantities of non-Orthodox literature being imported. "It's a question of proselytism," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 20 November. "If groups bring in millions of books, that means they intend to proselytise. If they bring in enough for their own followers, it's their right." He particularly objected to Jehovah's Witness literature, arguing that the group is a "totalitarian religious cult" whose literature is "unacceptable".

However, it is not just the Jehovah's Witnesses that have faced import difficulties. Pastor Sergei Osipov of the Tbilisi (T'bilisi) unregistered Baptist congregation told Forum 18 that his Church has been waiting for more than half a year to get a large shipment of books through customs. "We didn't know the borders were closed," he told Forum 18. "They said we need the blessing of the Patriarchate." He said the irony was that the Georgian-language Bibles had the approval of Patriarch Ilya as they had reprinted an edition previously produced with Orthodox approval by the Georgian Bible Society.

Osipov also reported that Georgian customs had held up a car bringing in literature from the separatist region of South Ossetia last spring. He said customs took the literature - the Baptist magazine Herald of Truth and children's literature - to a local Orthodox priest in the town of Gori, who had given permission for it to be imported. Customs released the car and literature after the Baptists paid fifty dollars to cover one week's "storage" for the books. He said when customs discover copies of Herald of Truth with individual travellers they tell them: "We don't need religious literature here, still less in Russian."

"The problem is that no-one will allow us to bring religious literature through customs officially," Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky told Forum 18. He said the literature they have was imported before 1997. "The last time we imported religious literature it took so much effort," Kalutsky told Forum 18. "They told us we needed permission from the Patriarchate." He said they eventually managed to get customs clearance for the shipment after the intervention of Aslan Abashidze, the leader of the Adjara autonomous republic in south-west Georgia.

Kalutsky recounted the case of another Protestant pastor who tried to bring in a small number of Turkish-language Bibles through Tbilisi airport. Customs officials wanted to confiscate them, and the pastor had to bribe them to allow him to keep them.

One Protestant pastor, who did not wish to be named, told Forum 18 that church members had tried to import 150 hymn books in Russian via the check-point at Lars in northern Georgia. "Customs officers said they had an unpublished instruction not to allow in religious literature without permission from the Patriarchate," the pastor reported. The church members had to take the books back to Russia to avoid their confiscation.

Pastor Mamuka Jebisashvili of Word of Life Protestant church complained that they can only bring in small quantities of literature through customs. They used to send boxes of literature on commercial bus services from Russia, but bus drivers have refused to take it after customs opened them and started making life difficult for the bus company. "Two years ago a bus driver had been forced to

pay a fifty-dollar bribe to get our boxes through customs," he told Forum 18. "Since then they have refused to bring anything else in."

The Jehovah's Witnesses have tried to bring in several large shipments in recent years, with varying degrees of obstruction by the authorities. Their lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia told Forum 18 that this year they have succeeded several times after years of obstruction, despite a politically-motivated court case to strip the Watchtower association of its tax-registered status which has made importing more difficult.

The latest 12-tonne shipment was eventually successful. "The customs said the papers were not in order, there was a problem with our tax number, we couldn't import until our appeal against the stripping of registration is heard etc. etc.," Tsimintia told Forum 18. "Eventually they released the shipment." He said small-scale imports with private individuals generally get through.

The Lutheran Church imports small quantities of literature from ELKRAS, their headquarter body in Russia, and from Germany. "There are always problems with customs," Pastor Gari Azikov told Forum 18. "There is an issue both of corruption and of discrimination against religious minorities." He said last year's draft religion law specifically laid down that religious literature could only be imported with the Patriarchate's permission.

An official of Tbilisi's only mosque told Forum 18 that although the Muslims do not publish in Georgia, they bring in small quantities of literature from neighbouring Azerbaijan. He said that although this was difficult three years ago, it has now become easier, although customs officers check the material closely and often try to extract bribes in exchange for letting it through. "We don't ask for the Patriarchate's permission," the official declared.

Fr Nairik Kushyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church told Forum 18 at the city's cathedral on 2 November that his Church had not published any literature in Georgia, but had not faced any problems importing it from neighbouring Armenia.

Rabbi Avimelech Rosenblath of Tbilisi's synagogue told Forum 18 on 3 November that his community had no problem importing literature in Hebrew, Georgian or Russian. He said they never asked permission from the Patriarchate.

Occasionally the police have confiscated religious literature within the country. Levan Ramishvili, head of the Liberty Institute, cited confiscations of Baptist, Jehovah's Witness and Hare Krishna literature. He told Forum 18 that several tonnes of books being stored in the Hare Krishna temple were seized and only recovered (after some had been destroyed) when his institute had got involved.

Meanwhile, Baptist sources reported a bizarre incident in early October, when Tbilisi traffic police had stopped a car carrying religious literature in the city's Varketili district. When they discovered what was in the car they took the driver to the police station to check his documents. When he told them it was Baptist church literature and presented his church identity documents they apologised profusely for any trouble they might have caused him and let him and the books go.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

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

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