

7 August 2018

DONBAS: Luhansk: Armed raids, worship bans, fines

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Armed men - often from the State Security Ministry or police of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic - often raid religious communities, halt worship meetings and seize religious literature. Courts hand down fines of several weeks' average wages to punish "illegal" worship meetings. A further ban on unapproved worship is imminent.

Authorities of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic, an unrecognised entity in eastern Ukraine, have regularly halted worship meetings by a range of religious communities, seized religious literature and fined religious leaders.

The most recent raid came on a Pentecostal Church in Alchevsk on 6 August, with two court cases due on 8 August. Earlier raids included those on Baptist and Jehovah's Witness communities in Krasnodon, Gorodyshe, Molodogvardeisk, Stakhanov, Nagolno-Tarasovka, Chervonopartizansk, Alchevsk and Luhansk. Many individuals were fined several weeks' average wages for holding "illegal" worship meetings (see below).

Armed men have seized five Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, while only two of the 18 pre-2014 Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate churches locally still function (see below).

Pro-Russian rebels seized parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region in March 2014 and the following month proclaimed what they called the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which currently controls about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region, has declared a state of martial law.

Pro-Russian rebels similarly seized parts of Ukraine's Donetsk Region in April 2014 and proclaimed what they called the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration currently controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not undergone local registration are illegal. They point to a May 2015 Decree by Igor Plotnitsky, the then Head of the unrecognised entity, banning mass events while the area was under martial law, and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council on 2 February.

Punishments for worship meetings

Courts generally punish religious leaders under Administrative Code Article 20.2. The LPR Administrative Code, which draws heavily on Russia's Administrative Code, was adopted in July 2016.

Administrative Code Article 20.2 punishes "Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets".

Part 1 punishes "Violation by organisers of public events of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets" with for individuals fines of 3,000 to 5,000 Russian Roubles or community work of up to 30 hours.

Part 2 punishes holding public meetings without informing the authorities, with for individuals fines of 5,000 to 10,000 Russian Roubles, community work of up to 50 hours, or up to 10 days' imprisonment.

A fine of 5,000 Russian Roubles (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble) is equivalent to 2,125 Ukrainian Hryvnia, 650 Norwegian Kroner, 70 Euros or 80 US Dollars. It represents more than three weeks' local average wages for those in formal work.

Further crackdown to follow re-registration deadline expiry?

The 5 February Religion Law, which was published on 7 February and came into force ten days later, imposes compulsory registration on all religious communities. Communities must have at least 30 adult local resident members to apply for registration.

The Law also imposes state registration of all religious literature, which - once approved - can be distributed only by religious communities among their own members and must have the religious community's full name on it.

Religious communities in rebel-held territory fear that measures against them could be stepped up from 18 August, when the six-month deadline for re-registering under the new Religion Law expires. Article 33, Part 1 of the Law declares that communities which fail to re-register by then "are deemed to have ceased their activity in the territory of the Luhansk People's Republic".

Any community seeking registration has to be approved by an "Expert Commission of State Religious Studies Expert Analysis", initially created as a Council in September 2017. Only two religious communities - both of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) - had gained registration by 18 June.

A further 230 religious communities had lodged applications, Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry, told a briefing in Luhansk that day. Of these, 173 received initial approval by the end of June.

No answers

Asked about the raids and enforced closures of religious communities by its officers, the State Security Ministry in Luhansk referred all questions to its spokesperson, Yevgeniya Lyubenko. However, the duty officer told Forum 18 on 6 and 7 August that she was away from work. On 7 August her assistant Albina (last name unknown) declined to come to the phone.

The duty officer admitted to Forum 18 that he found the raids on meetings for worship "offensive", but declined to comment further.

Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry in Luhansk, was similarly unavailable. A colleague told Forum 18 on 3 August that he was in a meeting. On 6 August a colleague - who did not give her name - told Forum 18 he was on holiday. She was unable to say when he would return.

The Department official refused to discuss why officials raid religious communities, halt worship meetings and fine religious leaders. She also refused to discuss why her boss Litsoev attends court hearings when religious leaders are fined.

Asked what will happen to religious communities that do not gain registration after the 18 August deadline or do not wish to gain registration, the official responded: "This hasn't come into force yet. You will find out once it has." She then put the phone down.

Litsoev had earlier refused to discuss the banning of religious communities. "I won't discuss who is banned," he told Forum 18 on 12 June. "No organisations are banned." He then added that he would not comment on anything else and put the phone down.

Alchevsk: Detentions follow Pentecostal Church raid

On 6 August, men armed with automatic weapons - apparently from the LPR State Security Ministry - raided a Grace Church of God Pentecostal church in Alchevsk and halted the worship meeting, Pastor Petr Dudnik told Forum 18 on 7 August from Slavyansk. They forced all those present to lie face down on the floor and seized the church computer.

Officers detained several church leaders, including the pastor, Viktor Koval. They were freed later in the day. Pastor Koval and another church member are expected to face court on 8 August, Pastor Dudnik added.

Asked on 7 August why officers raided the church, the duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Alchevsk told Forum 18: "This is the first I've heard of it. I have no information."

Ukrainian Baptist Union "banned"

On 26 July, the LPR State Security Ministry announced on its website that it had banned the "destructive activity of the extremist religious organisation the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian/Baptist Churches". The Ministry claimed that the Baptist Union "with its headquarters in Kiev" had refused to submit to compulsory state registration locally.

The Ministry complained that local leaders under the Baptist Union had "organised and conducted mass events" in violation of the local May 2015 Decree on mass events and Articles 17 and 18 of the local Religion Law.

"The religious association preached the idea of the forcible seizure of the republic by the Ukrainian armed forces," the Ministry alleged, "and maintained close ties with representatives of Ukrainian nationalist armed formations." It then went on to claim that locally the Baptists subjected church members to "psychotropic substances".

The Ministry added that the Baptist Union had invited local medical personnel to "mass religious events" where private medical

activity was conducted without authorisation from the relevant Ministry.

"During an inspection of the organisation's activity, printed publications and audio-video materials were found which were directed at inciting enmity and hatred on the basis of ethnicity, origin, adherence to a social group, as well as the justification of military crimes conducted by Kiev security people in relation to civilians in Donbas." The Ministry said that unnamed experts had determined that this literature was "extremist".

Article 12 of the Religion Law says that only a court can decide to liquidate or ban a religious community. Forum 18 has been unable to find any court decision banning the Baptist Union locally.

Pastor Igor Bandura, first deputy head of Ukraine's Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that he has seen no document confirming the ban. "We've seen no court document or other legal order," he told Forum 18 on 2 August. "Our churches mostly still function, though officials have forcibly closed some, including the one in Molodogvardeisk."

Officials closed the Baptist church in Molodogvardeisk in June and fined its leader in August (see below).

The Ministry website showed what it claimed was a 7 March letter from the regional Baptist leader Gennady Shulzhenko (who is based in the Ukrainian government-controlled part of Luhansk Region) describing the local Religion Law adopted the previous month as "unacceptable for believers" as it "violates and restricts the rights of Christ's churches".

The alleged Shulzhenko letter also declared that "Our land will be liberated!", adding: "Together we will resolve the armed conflict and cleanse the seized territories of Ukraine!"

Pastor Bandura insisted the letter was forged. "I am 100 per cent certain this letter is fake - even more than that," he told Forum 18. "Pastor Shulzhenko never wrote this letter. I asked him. The only place where it was seen is when intruders closed our church in Molodogvardeisk, nowhere else."

The State Security Ministry added in its website statement: "Further measures are underway to unmask, halt and block the illegal activity of religious organisations on the territory of the LPR, including in connection with the distribution of religious printed publications of an extremist nature."

Krasnodon: Baptists raided

On 10 June, police raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne], just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. The church had gathered for its regular Sunday morning worship meeting when police arrived.

Officers told church members that under Article 9 of the local Religion Law, religious communities are banned from meeting unless they have the compulsory state registration. Officers ordered that church members disperse immediately, local Baptists told Forum 18.

Officers questioned Pastor Vladimir Rytikov and several other church members and warned them that until the church gets registration it is banned from meeting. "If they still continue to meet, they will be taken to court, fined and the house where they hold services will be sealed," Baptists quoted the police as telling them.

"We will continue to meet just as we have been meeting up till now," church members told the police. "Christ's commandments, recorded in the Bible, are for us higher than human laws. And we cannot fulfil laws which contradict Holy Scripture because we serve God, Who is the highest power over all living creatures."

Council of Churches Baptists have a policy of not seeking state permission to meet for worship and exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief in any parts of the former Soviet Union where they are active. They point out that the local Religion Law specifies in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

Krasnodon: Baptist Pastor fined

On 18 June, officers drew up a record of an offence against Pastor Rytikov under Article 20.2, Part 2 of the July 2016 local Administrative Code, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 13 July.

On 11 July, Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh of Krasnodon Town and District Court found Pastor Rytikov guilty of an offence under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 because he "conducted public events without submitting notification under the established procedure for conducting public events". She fined him 8,000 Russian Roubles.

The court decision notes that Pastor Rytikov did not admit any guilt, and explained "that he gathered with other believers to pray,

and that he lodged no application anywhere, as he thinks that under the LPR Constitution he has the right to [hold] meetings freely without any kind of document".

As the Baptists point out, the Constitution of the self-proclaimed entity notes in Article 24: "Citizens of Luhansk People's Republic have the right to meet peacefully, without weapons, to hold gatherings, meetings and demonstrations, processions and pickets in accordance with the law." Article 48, Part 2 declares: "The rights and freedoms of the individual and citizen can be restricted by law only as far as it is necessary with the aim of defending the constitutional order, morals, health, the rights and legal interests of other people and securing the defence of the country and security of the state."

"Our peaceful Christian services were never directed at subverting the constitutional order," local Baptists note, "and did not threaten the security of the state. Rather, the love of God to all people was preached there."

Gorodyshe: Church-led medical outreach forcibly halted

On the afternoon of 9 June, armed men - two of them wearing masks - broke into the youth centre of the Baptist Union church in the village of Gorodyshe near Perevalsk. They arrived soon after a medical session had begun, provided by four volunteer doctors (therapist, neuropathologist, ophthalmologist and urologist/ultrasound doctor) and two students as part of a church-led project to help local people.

The armed men - who refused to identify themselves or show any document - halted the medical session and forced the patients to leave, telling them that such medical treatment was an administrative offence. They then forced the doctors to write statements.

The armed men then seized the medical equipment, including an ocular diagnostic kit, cardiograph and ultrasound, but gave no confiscation record.

Molodogvardeisk: Worship raided, halted, leader fined

On 3 June, five armed men in civilian clothes and balaclavas raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship of the Baptist Union Church in Molodogvardeisk, Baptists told Forum 18. About 35 church members were meeting when the men - who said they were from the local State Security Ministry - arrived.

The intruders stopped the meeting, demanded explanations and asked to see documents permitting the worship. They searched the premises, seizing literature and the church laptop. They ordered all those present to give their address and phone numbers and then let most of them leave.

The church's leader, Sergei Zharkov, and four church members were held and ordered to write statements. The men then sealed the premises and went to the house used by the church for alcohol and drug addicts' rehabilitation. There they also conducted a search and seized literature, medicines and a computer hard drive. They then sealed the entire building. Four residents were put on the street.

The following day, police summoned and brutally interrogated Zharkov about the community's activities, putting a bandage on his eyes and taking him to unknown areas. Officers then searched his home, at the end of which they seized a hard drive from his computer, literature and his phone, along with the SIM card.

The district police officer informed Zharkov that a case was opened under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 for "holding illegal religious gatherings". Items the police seized have not been returned and the rooms remain sealed.

On 1 August, Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh of Krasnodon Town and District Court fined Zharkov 8,000 Russian Roubles, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

The duty officer at the State Security Ministry department in Krasnodon refused to say if the men who raided the Baptist Church in Molodogvardeisk had been its officers. "I can't say, because this is a telephone conversation," the officer - who would not give his name - told Forum 18 on 3 August. "Send your questions in writing." He then put the phone down.

Asked the same day why police had summoned and brutally interrogated church leader Zharkov, the duty police officer in Molodogvardeisk - who would not give his name - told Forum 18: "The pastor knows why." He then put the phone down.

Stakhanov: Who were vandals in military uniform?

On the evening of 27 March, men in military uniforms arrived in two cars at the church of the Council of Churches Baptists in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka]. The men broke in to the unoccupied building.

"According to eyewitnesses, the lights were turned on everywhere and the destruction of the prayer house began," Baptists

complained to Forum 18. About 11pm, two lorries arrived. The men in military clothing began removing "literally everything" from the building, including the pulpit, the communion chalice, the amplification system, musical instruments, radiators and all the kitchen equipment. They took this away in the lorries.

The intruders also vandalised the building, breaking down internal doors and damaging windows, electrical fittings and lino.

The following day, on discovering the damage, church members went to the police and the head of the town administration, Sergei Zhevnikov. They were promised answers within two weeks.

Asked about the vandalism of the church, Zhevnikov told Forum 18 on 3 August that "this is not within our competence". He then put the phone down.

An officer of the State Security Ministry in Stakhanov, who refused to give his name, told Forum 18 on 3 August that the investigation was being conducted by the police, not by the State Security Ministry. Asked why a raid by men in military uniform was not an issue for his agency, he replied: "Who said they were in military uniform? The Baptists weren't there."

Asked if the Baptists are allowed to meet for worship in the vandalised house, the officer responded: "They're not banned as long as they have registration."

The duty police officer in Stakhanov told Forum 18 on 7 August that town police chief Colonel Sergei Cherkayev was on leave. He referred questions to his deputy Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Kutsov. However, his phone went unanswered.

Nagolno-Tarasovka: Worship banned, pastor fined

On 22 October 2017, police banned the Baptist Union church in the village of Nagolno-Tarasovka near Rovenki from continuing to meet for worship. The church had met since 2010 in a home. Officers claimed that conduct of worship represented "unauthorised public gatherings and public events among the population".

Police prepared administrative cases against the church's pastor, Vasily Logvinenko. Judge Svetlana Dermenzhi of Rovenki City Court fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles. In a separate case in 2018, Judge Yelena Sen of the same court also fined Pastor Logvinenko 5,000 Russian Roubles, Baptists told Forum 18.

Chervonopartizansk: Jehovah's Witness fined for home meeting

On 14 October 2017, Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Safarov was meeting with up to 30 others behind closed doors in a flat in the town of Chervonopartizansk [official Ukrainian name Voznesenivka] belonging to an 84-year-old. They were meeting for "friendly association, prayer and Bible reading", Safarov insisted.

Police and State Security Ministry officers raided the flat during the meeting, recording all those present on video and seizing "personal items with no procedural documents".

Officers then took four of those present, including Safarov, to the police station, according to the subsequent court decision seen by Forum 18. Officers pressured the four to sign statements prepared by the police, even though they disagreed with what the police had written. Safarov later told the court that being "severely intimidated by the aggressive actions" of the police and State Security Ministry officers, he reluctantly signed the statement, even though he did not agree with it.

A case was brought against Safarov under local Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 1 ("Violation by organisers of public events of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets").

On 27 November 2017 at the District and Regional Court in Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk], Judge Lyudmila Skaliush found Safarov guilty, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. She fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles.

Safarov did not acknowledge any guilt, arguing that the meeting was private and was a meeting of friends not linked to any organisation.

Present in court as a "specialist" was Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry in Luhansk. He insisted that all meetings require permission, regardless of what organisation is holding them, and police and security agencies need to be informed. He set out registration requirements, adding that "conducting any events of a religious nature on private land is impermissible".

Also present in court as a "specialist" was Ukrainian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priest Fr Aleksii Slyusarenko, who was then a theology lecturer at Luhansk National University. He insisted that Safarov should be found guilty of holding a religious meeting without state permission. He reminded the court that Russia had banned Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist", as had the two

breakaway regions of Georgia: Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Fr Slyusarenko added that Russian anti-"sect" activist Aleksandr Dvorkin had described the group as a "pseudo-religious cult which hides its commercial interests behind religious phraseology".

Forum 18 was unable to reach Fr Slyusarenko at Holy Annunciation Church in Luhansk on 6 and 7 August.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Sverdlovsk had already faced pressure. On 19 April 2017, two State Security Ministry officers threatened local Jehovah's Witnesses with "negative consequences" if they refused to cooperate with them. The lead detective of the town police, R. Zemlianukhin, refused to conduct an investigation because the religious community does not have local registration, Jehovah's Witnesses lamented.

Luhansk, Alchevsk: State Security Ministry raids, seizures, planted literature?

On 4 August 2017, "anti-terror units", together with soldiers and police, interrupted the religious services of Jehovah's Witnesses in Luhansk and the town of Alchevsk, claiming that there had been a bomb threat. After evacuating the worshippers from the buildings, the officers checked the documents of everyone in attendance.

In Alchevsk, officers video recorded their inspection of the building, purportedly in search of a bomb. "The search turned up a small quantity of the Witnesses' religious literature and then 'found' anti-LPR propaganda pamphlets that the officers had smuggled in and planted," Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

In Alchevsk, two elders were interrogated all day. They explained that throughout the conflict, the congregation has been holding their worship services without disturbance in their Kingdom Hall, which is located near the commandant's office.

In the same day as the raid, Alchevsk Town Court fined one elder, Andriy Mezhytsky, 5,000 Russian Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 1 for organising a mass meeting and 3,000 Russian Roubles for allegedly violating fire regulations in the Kingdom Hall.

On 28 August 2017, the State Security Ministry claimed on its website that during the inspections of Jehovah's Witness premises in Luhansk and Alchevsk, "agitational materials containing Nazi symbols and attributes were found, as well as leaflets urging collaboration with Ukrainian special services". The statement was read out by Deputy Security Minister Aleksandr Basov.

An accompanying video shows masked officers in camouflage uniform or in police clothing, some of them carrying weapons in their hands, arriving at the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Alchevsk as perhaps a hundred worshippers leave the building and wait in the sun outside. They then search the building.

In pictures which do not specify if they were from the Luhansk or Alchevsk searches, an Alsatian dog brought in by one of the armed men sniffs at a bag apparently left by a worshipper. Two officers inspect items from a safe as well as in cupboards.

In one room a masked officer takes a box from a cupboard and takes out pro-Ukrainian fliers with telephone numbers of the Ukrainian State Security Service in small, sealed envelopes which he opens out for the cameras. An officer opens several items of Jehovah's Witness literature and takes out leaflets allegedly from pro-Ukrainian paramilitary groups.

Jehovah's Witnesses insisted to Forum 18 that the literature allegedly found was not theirs and must have been planted. They pointed out that they are politically neutral and are pacifist.

Male police search undressed women

On 23 September 2017, police detained two female Jehovah's Witnesses as they shared their beliefs with others. Five male police officers forced the women to undress to their underwear and searched them. During the five-hour interrogation, officers forced the women to stand for the duration and threatened them with lengthy imprisonment. The interrogation continued for another hour at the State Security Ministry. Officers also searched the home of one of the women.

Five seized Jehovah's Witness properties

The Kingdom Halls in Luhansk and Alchevsk are among five Jehovah's Witnesses the authorities have seized locally. Officials also seized their Kingdom Halls in Brianka, Perevalsk and Krasny Luch, Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18.

On 30 April 2017, the Kingdom Hall in Sverdlovsk was robbed and desecrated. "In particular, the intruder relieved himself on the stage of the main hall," Jehovah's Witnesses complained. "The material damage is estimated at about 2,000 Euros."

On 30 May 2018, a fire destroyed the confiscated Luhansk Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, local media reported. It remains

unclear how the fire started or who was using the building at the time.

Ukrainian Orthodox Kiev Patriarchate fears for future

After initially closing all its eight churches in the city of Luhansk and 10 more in rebel-held areas in 2014, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate was allowed to reopen its Holy Trinity Cathedral in Luhansk for Christmas on 7 January 2015. In 2014, church members had successfully resisted an attempt by armed men to seize it to use as a barracks.

A second church in the city reopened soon after, "but services don't take place there regularly because of constant threats from drunken fighters to throw grenades at the church", Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk told Forum 18 on 7 August. The other churches remain closed.

Bishop Afanasi fears that the new registration requirements may make it impossible for his churches to continue to function. "Officials have warned that from 14 August activity by the Kiev Patriarchate will be halted," he told Forum 18.

Officials in the Justice Ministry, State Security Ministry and police refused to answer Forum 18's questions. (END)

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Donbas can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=87>.

A printer-friendly map of the disputed territories in Donbas, whose extent is not marked, can be found in the south-east of the map entitled 'Ukraine' <http://nationalgeographic.org/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Ukraine>.

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