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DONBAS: Luhansk: Re-registration denials, raids, religious communities closed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

No Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist or Pentecostal communities gained the compulsory re-registration the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic demanded by 15 October. Adventists received registration denial "with great pain" and reluctantly halted all their activities, trying to avoid church property seizure. Catholics are still awaiting an answer.

Following the re-registration deadline of 15 October imposed by the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic, an unrecognised entity in eastern Ukraine, the authorities regard many religious communities as illegal. All Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist and Pentecostal communities are among those denied re-registration.

Adventist churches received the registration denial "with great pain", an Adventist told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev. They reluctantly decided to halt all their activities to avoid "provoking unpleasantness" and to try to avoid the seizure of church property, including musical instruments and communion vessels (see below).

Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry in Luhansk, refused to explain why many communities' registration applications were rejected and what action officials will take against those meeting for worship without permission. Officials of the rebels' Justice Ministry, Interior Ministry and General Prosecutor's Office also refused to speak to Forum 18 (see below).

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that do not have 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 (see below).

The Religion Law bans Orthodox communities outside the framework of the Moscow Patriarchate from applying for registration (see below).

Repeated raids on places of worship and the re-registration denials have left many communities in a state of uncertainty. Many communities fear the consequences of giving personal data on their founders to the authorities in their registration applications, a United Nations (UN) report noting that "some parishioners do not want the 'authorities' to know of their participation in a certain religious organization" (see below).

The Head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the unrecognised entities Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry repeatedly refused to tell Forum 18 if officials will raid or ban religious communities if they continue to meet for worship without permission (see below).

Armed men raided a Baptist church in Brianka on 26 September. Following the 30 September raid on a Krasny Luch Baptist church's Sunday morning meeting for worship, the pastor is facing possible punishment. A Baptist Pastor in Krasnodon was summarily handed a 20-hour community service order after refusing to pay an earlier fine to punish him for leading unapproved worship raided by the police. Pentecostal leaders were detained and fined for meeting, while leaders of a Pentecostal children's camp were interrogated, threatened and beaten (see below).

Luhansk: Raids, bans, fines

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.

On 26 July, the LPR State Security Ministry announced that it had banned the "destructive activity of the extremist religious organisation the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian/Baptist Churches". Officials closed the Baptist church in

Molodogvardeisk in June and fined its leader in August. On 9 June, armed men who refused to identify themselves broke in to a Baptist church in the village of Gorodyshche. They halted a charitable medical clinic, seized medical equipment and dispersed doctors and patients. The raids followed earlier raids and fines, particularly on Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities, and seizures of places of worship (see F18News 7 August 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401>).

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. In rebel-held Donetsk, officials have closed, seized and confiscated many places of worship of a variety of faiths and banned Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 12 October 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2422>).

Re-registration: A means to ban religious communities?

The 2 February Religion Law claims to guarantee freedom of religion or belief, but imposes a range of restrictions. Article 3 allows restrictions when deemed necessary "to secure the defence of the country and the security of the state".

Although the Law claims to require that all religious communities are treated equally, Article 6 requires that Orthodox communities "have compulsory diocesan registration" and that the dioceses "are recognised by Ecumenical Orthodoxy within the framework of the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate".

This provision seems designed to prevent parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate from seeking registration. It might also prevent other Orthodox jurisdictions and Old Believers from seeking registration.

Local religious organisations need at least 20 or 30 adults living in one district of the LPR to apply for registration (Articles 6 and 7 give different numbers). A registration application has to include their names and personal data. Centralised religious organisations need at least five registered local congregations.

Any community seeking registration has to be approved by an "Expert Commission of State Religious Studies Expert Analysis".

The Religion Law specifies that registration is compulsory, adding that those that had registration but fail to regain it "will be considered to have halted their activity".

On 20 August the LPR People's Council amended the Religion Law to extend the re-registration period from 18 August to 15 October. The amendment, which was published on 22 August, reaffirmed that any activity by religious communities that failed to get re-registration would be illegal.

Sergei Nazarevich, first deputy Culture, Youth and Sport Minister, told the 20 August People's Council hearing that of 375 religious communities which had registration, 266 had already lodged re-registration applications which were undergoing "religious studies expert analyses".

Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry in Luhansk, refused to say how many religious communities applied for re-registration, how many received such re-registration and how many were refused and why. "I can't talk to you without authorisation from my superiors," he told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 18 October.

Some religious communities were able to gain re-registration. Two religious communities - both of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) - had gained registration by 18 June. The Hare Krishna community was successful, a Hare Krishna representative from outside the region told Forum 18.

Officials refuse to say if communities will be raided or banned

Repeated raids on places of worship and the re-registration denials have left many communities in a state of uncertainty. "We don't know if we can hold a service next Sunday in our church hall," the Kiev-based Institute for Religious Freedom quoted a church member on 16 October as telling it from Luhansk. "The authorities said that our buildings no longer belong to us."

The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern that "procedures for mandatory registration of all religious organizations limit freedom of religion or belief and create protection concerns for parishioners".

Many communities fear the consequences of giving personal data on their founders to the authorities in their registration applications, the UN report on human rights in Ukraine covering 16 May to 15 August added. "Some parishioners do not want the 'authorities' to know of their participation in a certain religious organization" (<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraineMay-August2018_EN.pdf>).

Litsoev of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry repeatedly refused to tell Forum 18 if officials will raid or ban religious communities if they continue to meet for worship without permission.

The duty prosecutor at the General Prosecutor's Office in Luhansk similarly refused to say. "Ask the Interior Ministry," the prosecutor told Forum 18 on 22 October before putting the phone down.

The duty officer at the Interior Ministry (which controls the police) insisted that a court would need to decide if a community is banned. "This is in accordance with our law," the officer - who did not give his name - claimed to Forum 18 on 22 October. He insisted that the only religious community that is banned are Jehovah's Witnesses. "Anyone who is not banned by law, let them meet."

Many denied or still awaiting re-registration

Adventist churches received the registration denial "with great pain", an Adventist told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev, "as this closed the possibility to secure the religious rights of a large group of Adventists, as well as to provide many charitable projects".

The Adventists reluctantly decided to halt all their activities to avoid "provoking unpleasantness", the Adventist added. "By and large, all our organised activity has been halted." The closure of their churches was also aimed at trying to avoid the seizure of "church property, musical instruments, and items for rituals such as baptism and the Lord's Supper".

Most of the 44 local Baptist communities which were part of the Ukrainian Baptist Union lodged re-registration applications. However, all had their applications refused, a Baptist told Forum 18.

One such Baptist re-registration rejection came in a late September one-page "conclusion of a state religious studies expert analysis", signed by Litsoev of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry and seen by Forum 18. It said the "expert commission" had found violations of Article 18 of the Religion Law in the documents the Baptist congregation had submitted.

The conclusion did not specify in what way the congregation's documents had violated these provisions. It merely stated that in view of this the registration of the congregation was "inadmissible".

The five Pentecostal communities which used to be linked to the Ukrainian Pentecostal Union received similar rejection letters, Union representatives told Forum 18 from Kiev. They said other independent Pentecostal communities also had registration applications denied.

The two Roman Catholic parishes, in Luhansk and in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka], applied for re-registration. "We're still waiting for a decision from the authorities," Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia, told Forum 18 on 19 October. The two parishes are now served by just one priest, as the other two have left since the 2014 conflict.

Not applying for re-registration

Communities of Jehovah's Witnesses decided not to apply for re-registration, believing that given the ban in neighbouring Russia there was little point (see eg. on Russia F18News 13 September 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2412>).

"It feels logical, since the Donetsk authorities have recently also banned the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses, following the course of the Russian Federation," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 23 October.

"Another reason is that the registration procedure implies the revealing of personal information on the worshippers who could easily become new targets of persecution," Jehovah's Witnesses added. They expect further raids and possible punishment in the near future.

The two remaining communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate in the city of Luhansk - including it Holy Trinity Cathedral - chose not to apply for re-registration. "They didn't apply and won't," Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk told Forum 18 on 18 October.

"A commission of officials visited our church in mid-October, inspected our documents and asked why we are not registered," Bishop Afanasi added. "Our priest showed our documents." He said officials have not moved to close the churches, but the threat remains.

Also choosing not to seek registration were communities of the Council of Churches Baptists. They 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: Community service order for refusing to pay fine

On 19 October, court bailiffs came to the home of Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] and summarily handed him a punishment of 20 hours' community service for refusing to pay a July fine, fellow Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 22 October.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Krasnodon District court bailiffs on 22 October.

Pastor Rytikov leads the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon, just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. Like all Council of Churches congregations it does not seek official registration.

Police raided the congregation's regular Sunday morning worship meeting on 10 June. 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.

On 11 July, 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 LPR uses the Russian Rouble). This represents about five weeks' average wages for those in formal work (see F18News 7 August 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401>).

Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 that no other church members have been fined locally.

Brianka: Baptist church raided

On 26 September, armed men in camouflage uniform raided Revival Baptist Church in the town of Brianka, west of Luhansk. The church was part of the Ukrainian Baptist Union.

The men "drove church members out of their own building, including those living there, onto the street", Pastor Petr Dudnik from Slavyansk - who retains close links with communities in Luhansk Region under rebel control - noted on his Facebook page the same day.

The church had provided help to those in need during the conflict. "Hundreds of people had come for food and water at the most critical time," Pastor Dudnik said. "Up till now the church has provided shelter to those in need, regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation. All this has now come to a halt."

The armed men left the church building after several hours when they discovered that it was the private property of a church member and had checked the ownership documents. "Before leaving the church, representatives of the occupation forces turned everything in it upside down," the Kiev-based Institute for Religious Freedom noted on 26 September.

Krasny Luch: Baptist meeting raided, court case to follow?

On 30 September, about 12 police officers in the southern town of Krasny Luch [official Ukrainian name Khrustalny] raided the Sunday morning meeting of Revival Baptist Church, fellow Baptists told Forum 18. More than 25 church members had gathered for worship in their church, led by Pastor Dmitry Sirbu.

Officers halted the worship service, claiming that the community did not have the necessary documents allowing them to function as a religious organisation. They sent most church members home. They questioned Pastor Sirbu in a separate room, as well as questioning other church members individually.

Officers tried to force open the church's safe, but Pastor Sirbu told them they were acting illegally. He said there was nothing of significance in the safe. However, officers then forced the safe open by drilling through the lock. They found a pillow, a blanket and some invoices for church expenses.

Officers then took Pastor Sirbu to the town branch of the State Security Ministry secret police for questioning and then to the ordinary police. Officers told him he had violated the Administrative Code and that a case against him had been handed to court. As of 23 October, no court hearing had taken place, fellow Baptists told Forum 18.

The duty officer at Krasny Luch Police refused to put Forum 18 through to the head, Lieutenant-Colonel Roman Shulga. "You can only talk in person to the head," he told Forum 18 on 22 October. While insisting that the police "never raid anyone" the duty officer insisted he was not authorised to speak.

Asked about the participation of SSM secret police officers in the raid and questioning, the duty officer at the SSM secret police branch in Krasny Luch told Forum 18 on 23 October: "You're mistaken. You have distorted information. No one sent anyone there." The officer - who would not give his name - repeatedly refused to explain what he believed happened at the Baptist Church on 30 September.

Pentecostal leaders fined

Police and other armed men detained Pentecostal leaders who had gathered for a meeting in August, the Institute for Religious Freedom noted. Officers recorded the personal details of all those present. The church leaders were each fined between 1,000 and 7,000 Russian Roubles for holding a religious meeting without official permission.

Beatings follow church camp

Officials detained three Pentecostals - two women and a man - for organising a children's summer camp in August which officials considered "subversive". "They interrogated and threatened the children's ministry leaders, brutally beat them and then released them," the Institute for Religious Freedom noted.

Alchevsk: Pentecostal leaders fined

Two leaders of Grace Church of God Pentecostal church in Alchevsk - including Pastor Viktor Koval - were fined on 8 August, fellow Protestants told Forum 18.

On 6 August, men armed with automatic weapons - apparently from the LPR State Security Ministry - raided the church and halted its worship meeting. 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.

Asked why officers raided the church, the duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Alchevsk told Forum 18 the day after the raid: "This is the first I've heard of it. I have no information" (see F18News 7 August 2018 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401>). (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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