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DONBAS: Luhansk: No gas, electricity, water for unregistered communities

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The rebel Luhansk People's Republic – which denies registration to many religious communities including all Protestants – threatens to cut off gas, electricity and water to places of worship belonging to unrecognised communities. The rebel authorities have allowed the only Catholic priest to return to the territory, but have not said if he can remain permanently or only for three months.

In 2019 the rulers of the unrecognised self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine cut off or threatened to cut off gas, electricity and water supplies to religious communities which had a recognised place of worship but which failed to gain registration under LPR laws. Gas supplies were cut off in 2019. In late 2019 the LPR authorities also threatened to cut off electricity and water supplies.

"Officials argue that they cannot supply gas, electricity and water to organisations that don't officially exist, as they can't have contracts with them," Baptist Pastor Serhii Moroz told Forum 18 (see below).

In December 2019 Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Dmitry Sidorov, revealed that of the 195 registered religious organisations, 188 are from the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. The others are Muslim, Old Believer, Jewish and Catholic. No Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Hare Krishna or other communities are allowed to get registration (see below).

In December 2019 the LPR authorities allowed the only Roman Catholic priest serving the two local Catholic parishes to return to the region, but without saying if he can remain permanently or if he will have to leave when three months are up (see below).

"This year we lived for a long time with no priest," local Catholics wrote in a Christmas 2019 letter to the Vatican nuncio, who led the Christmas Mass in Luhansk on 25 December. "It was very difficult" (see below).

Fr Grzegorz Rapa is only allowed to stay in LPR-controlled territory for three months at a time, and then must leave for three months. In the three months when Fr Rapa is unable to visit Luhansk, Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass (see below).

Catholic nuns who used to work in the Luhansk parish left amid the conflict in 2014. "The people want them to work there again. We want them to," one Catholic told Forum 18 (see below).

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry's Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department, with whom the Catholics are discussing Fr Rapa's case, refused to explain to Forum 18 why it is obstructing his residence in Luhansk (see below).

The rebel authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities isolated from their fellow-believers elsewhere.

In late January 2020, the unrecognised LPR's State Security Ministry threatened Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – with an "extremism" criminal prosecution if he continues to lead Council of Churches Baptist meetings for worship without the permission of the LPR authorities (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539). In November 2019 the rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist". (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)

Prosecutors are also still investigating Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest Fr Anatoli Nazarenko on "extremism" charges. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539)

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), which is internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which in February 2020 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), which is also internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration in February 2020 controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

Registration – only for a few

As of December 2019, the LPR authorities had registered only 195 religious organisations, according to figures given by Dmitry Sidorov, Culture, Sport and Youth Minister, at a 26 December 2019 briefing in the government building in Luhansk.

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not been given permission to exist via 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 is under martial law (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401), and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council.

The Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for state permission to exist (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425), and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – the successor of the Kiev Patriarchate – has not applied for registration for its Luhansk cathedral and another parish in the rebel-controlled territory.

Of the 195 religious organisations registered in December 2019, 188 were of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, four were Muslim, and one each were Old Believer, Jewish and Catholic, Sidorov noted.

The Religion Law bans all exercise of freedom of religion and belief without the permission of the authorities (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). No Protestant community received state permission to exist. Following this, "with great pain" Seventh-day Adventist communities reluctantly decided to halt all their activities to avoid "provoking unpleasantness" and the seizure of church property, including musical instruments and communion vessels. In September 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned.

In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or face punishment. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462) "Officials earlier didn't insist that our churches should not meet for worship," Pastor Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18. "But they have now sent a clear message that they will not tolerate such meetings for worship any more." The Baptist Union reluctantly decided that its congregations could no longer meet publicly for services after the last Sunday worship on 10 March 2019.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, refused to tell Forum 18 if any other religious communities have gained registration since December 2019 or why applications from many communities – including all Protestant communities - have been refused.

Officials of the Registration Department of the Justice Ministry – which is supposed to register religious communities – have repeatedly refused absolutely to say which communities have been allowed to register and which have been refused, or give any overall statistics.

Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Sidorov claimed at the 26 December 2019 briefing that a "further range of organisations which have undergone the religious studies expert analysis are now in the stage of state registration with the LPR Justice Ministry".

Some religious communities have not applied for registration and so permission to exist. Council of Churches Baptists (who do not seek registration on principle as they see this as leading to state interference) are therefore regarded as "illegal" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). This is despite – as the Baptists have noted - the local Religion Law stating in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

Jehovah's Witnesses also did not apply for state permission to exist, pointing out that "the registration procedure implies the revealing of personal information on the worshippers who could easily become new targets".

No registration – no gas, electricity, water

Religious communities which had a recognised place of worship but which failed to gain registration under LPR laws had their gas cut off in 2019, Baptist Pastor Serhii Moroz, who is originally from the region but now lives in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020. In late 2019 came the threat that electricity and water too would be cut off.

"Officials argue that they cannot supply gas, electricity and water to organisations that don't officially exist, as they can't have contracts with them," Pastor Moroz told Forum 18.

Communities which met in church members' homes have not had gas, electricity and water supplies cut, Pastor Moroz added.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, told Forum 18 she had not heard that gas, electricity and water supplies have been or are threatened with being cut off to places of worship that have not been able to gain registration.

"A long time with no priest"

In late 2019, the LPR authorities allowed the only Roman Catholic priest serving the local Catholic parishes – in Luhansk and Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka] - to return to the region. Fr Grzegorz Rapa returned in early December 2019. However, the LPR authorities have not yet told him if he can remain permanently or if he will have to leave again in March 2020 when three months are up.

Fr Rapa – a Polish priest who has served Luhansk's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish since 1993 – was earlier not allowed to live there permanently. "He can stay there for three months, then has to be out for three months," Bishop Jan Sobilo told Forum 18 in October 2019. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516)

This means that in the three months when Fr Rapa is unable to visit Luhansk, Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass.

When Fr Rapa is unable to live in or visit Luhansk, Mass has to be broadcast over the internet via Skype to the congregation in the church. "They have to set up a screen on the altar and a projector," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). "It is like in Soviet times." He recalled that during Soviet years, a radio was often put on the altar of a church with no priest to broadcast Mass to the congregation.

Catholic nuns who used to work in the Luhansk parish left amid the conflict in 2014. "The people want them to work there again. We want them to," one Catholic told Forum 18.

The rebel LPR authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities isolated from their fellow-believers elsewhere.

"This year we lived for a long time with no priest," local Catholics wrote in a Christmas 2019 letter to the Vatican nuncio Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, who led the Christmas Mass in Luhansk on 25 December. "It was very difficult. And not only for us. Now he has returned, Fr Grzegorz has to work much harder to help us overcome all the difficulties we face. We are very grateful to our parish priest."

The letter – read out by a parishioner from the Stakhanov parish at the Christmas Mass in Luhansk - was posted on the Vatican Nunciature website. Archbishop Gugerotti also sent a copy to Pope Francis on 28 December 2019. The Pope responded later the same day with a hand written note, saying how touched he had been by the letter from the parishioners of Luhansk and Stakhanov and offering his prayers.

"It is not clear if the Luhansk authorities will allow Fr Rapa to remain there permanently, or if he will be required to leave again after three months," Catholics told Forum 18 on 5 February. "This is still being discussed." Catholics have been liaising with the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk.

However, Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department, refused to discuss with Forum 18 the difficulties the LPR authorities are causing Catholics by refusing to allow Fr Rapa to remain permanently in Luhansk to serve the Catholic community. (END)

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