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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Zaporizhzhia priests still "disappeared", 4 churches banned

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

13 months after Russia's National Guard "disappeared" two Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, and 7 months after Russian occupiers "disappeared" Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov, no information is known on whether they are still alive and, if so, where and why they are being held. Investigation Prisons in Crimea and Donetsk refused to say if they are holding them. In December 2022, the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Region governor banned the Greek Catholic Church, Grace Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Church.

More than a year after Russia's National Guard in November 2022 seized two Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, in the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region, the occupying forces have given no information on whether they are still alive and, if so, where and why they are being held. Similarly, the occupiers have given no information on the fate of Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov, a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in Tokmak, seized as he tried to cross into Crimea in May 2023.

"We have had no information about Fr Ivan or Fr Bohdan," a representative of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 on 18 December (see below).

"Currently, the reliable whereabouts of Maksimov are not known," the Center for Civil Liberties in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, which has been following Fr Kostiantyn's case, told Forum 18 (see below).

An official of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Prosecutor's Office refused to discuss whether any criminal case has been lodged against the two Greek Catholic priests or any other aspect of their situation. Forum 18 was unable to ask about Fr Kostiantyn as the official had put the phone down (see below).

An official of the Special Department of Investigation Prison No. 1 in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea refused to say if any of these priests are being held in the prison. "I don't have the right to give any information by telephone," she repeatedly told Forum 18. Telephones at Simferopol's Investigation Prison No. 2 went unanswered (see below).

Similarly, an official of the Special Department of the Investigation Prison in Russian-occupied Donetsk refused to say if any of the priests are being held there (see below).

The Russian authorities refused to give any information to three United Nations Special Rapporteurs who had expressed "serious concern" over enforced disappearances and other violations of freedom of religion or belief in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. The Russian response complained of "the unacceptable nature of the content of the communication" (see below).

The Greek Catholic Church was one of four religious communities the Russian-installed governor of the part of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region under Russian occupation banned in December 2022. The others were Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Protestant Church. Yevgeny Balitsky accused these Churches of links with foreign "special services" and ordered all their property seized (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Balitsky signed such sweeping decrees banning the four Churches. Yevgeniya Zaitseva, spokesperson for the Russian occupation Zaporizhzhia Region Administration, did not respond to Forum 18's question. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone (see below).

The Russian occupation authorities in parts of Zaporizhzhia Region they control had already seized all the places of worship of these communities, as well as places of worship of other communities (see below).

Illegal imposition of Russian law

Russia's February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine saw more Ukrainian territories brought under Russian occupation. As of mid-December 2023, Russia controls about 70 per cent of Zaporizhzhia Region. Freedom of religion and belief is with other human rights severely restricted within all Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>).

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights notes that under international humanitarian law, Russia as the occupying power must respect the laws of Ukraine in the territory it occupies.

"However, following the illegal so-called referendums organized in occupied areas of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts [regions] in September 2022, the Russian Federation unlawfully annexed these regions, and imposed Russian political, legal and administrative systems," it notes in its report on human rights in Ukraine from 1 August to 30 November 2023, issued on 12 December (A/HRC/55/CRP.2 (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session55/advance-versions/a-hrc-55-crp-2-en.pdf>)).

Russia has registered 24 religious communities under Russian law in the parts of Zaporizhzhia Region it controls, according to Russian tax records. Of these, 18 are the Russian Orthodox diocese of Berdyansk and its parishes (which are subject directly to the Patriarch of Moscow). The others are 5 Baptist and 1 Pentecostal Church.

Russians "disappeared" Greek Catholic priests 13 months ago

On 16 November 2022, troops of Russia's National Guard seized two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793), Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, in the coastal town of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region. They accuse them of storing weapons and explosives in the church, accusations the Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate denied. The Russian occupation authorities then forcibly closed the local Greek Catholic parishes.

When in May 2023 Forum 18 asked the Russian Berdyansk Police where the priests are, they replied (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832): "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." The occupation police officer refused to give any evidence for this claim and put the phone down.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, insisted to Forum 18 in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) (without producing evidence) that Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta stored weapons in their church.

"We have had no information about Fr Ivan or Fr Bohdan," a representative of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 on 18 December.

An official of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Prosecutor's Office refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 19 December whether any criminal case has been lodged against Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan or any other aspect of their situation.

An official of the Special Department of Investigation Prison No. 1 in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea refused to say if Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan are being held in the prison. "I don't have the right to give any information by telephone," she repeatedly told Forum 18 on 19 December. Telephones at Simferopol's Investigation Prison No. 2 went unanswered on 19 and 20 December.

Similarly, an official of the Special Department of the Investigation Prison in Russian-occupied Donetsk refused to say if Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan are being held there. "We don't give information by phone," she kept repeating on 20 December, before putting the phone down.

Russians "disappeared" Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest 7 months ago

Since 2021, Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov, a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), has been serving in the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the city of Tokmak in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. Russian occupation forces detained Fr Kostiantyn in the southern town of Chongar (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) when he attempted to cross the administrative boundary with the occupied Ukrainian territory of Crimea on 16 May 2023.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, would not say where Fr Kostiantyn is. "I have not heard that he's left [the Russian-occupied territories]," Sharlay told Forum 18 from Melitopol in October (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867). "He's not serving [as a priest]," he added.

Sharlay claimed that Fr Kostiantyn had not wanted the Berdyansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to move to be

an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the Diocese in May, just days before Fr Kostiantyn was seized, following a request from some clergy. The Russian Orthodox Church replaced Metropolitan Yefrem (Yarinko), who had fled to Ukrainian-controlled territory.

"According to our data, Maksimov was in a camp in Chongar, and then he was probably transferred to a pre-trial detention centre," the Center for Civil Liberties in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, which has been following Fr Kostiantyn's case (<https://ccl.org.ua/en/voices/kostiantyn-maksymov/>), told Forum 18 on 20 December. "Currently, the reliable whereabouts of Maksimov are not known."

"I know Fr Kostiantyn," another local Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest, Fr Vladimir Saviisky, told Forum 18 on 18 December. "There has been no news of him at all."

Earlier in 2023, Russian officials pressured Fr Vladimir, then serving at St Nicholas Church in Primorsk, to accept the transfer of the Berdyansk Diocese from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to the Russian Orthodox Church. He refused and left Russian-occupied territory in June 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869).

An official of the Special Department of Investigation Prison No. 1 in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea refused to say if Fr Kostiantyn is being held in the prison. "I don't have the right to give any information by telephone," she repeatedly told Forum 18 on 19 December. Telephones at Simferopol's Investigation Prison No. 2 went unanswered on 19 and 20 December.

Similarly, an official of the Special Department of the Investigation Prison in Russian-occupied Donetsk refused to say if Fr Kostiantyn is being held there. "We don't give information by phone," she kept repeating on 20 December, before putting the phone down.

Forum 18 was unable to ask the official of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Prosecutor's Office on 19 December about Fr Kostiantyn, as the official had already put the phone down.

Russia refuses to respond to UN Rapporteurs' "unacceptable" concerns

On 8 November, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs - on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clement Nyaletossi Voule; on minority issues, Nicolas Levrat; and on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea - wrote to the Russian authorities (AL RUS 25/2023 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28563>)) over their concerns about violations of freedom of religion or belief in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

"Incidents of enforced disappearances and attacks on clergy in the occupied territories are widespread," the three Rapporteurs noted.

The three Rapporteurs cited several cases of enforced disappearances, including those of the two Berdyansk Greek Catholic priests. They told the Russian authorities of their "serious concern" over the reports of "enforced disappearances and torture or ill-treatment of clergy in the occupied territories in violation of international human rights law".

"Please urgently provide information on any members of the clergy from the occupied territories currently detained by Russian authorities," the Rapporteurs asked.

The Russian Permanent Mission to the UN replied on 21 November (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=37833>), claiming it "has the honour to note the unacceptable nature of the content of the

communication." The Russian government went on to claim that "all requests made in a manner offensive to the authorities and population of the Russian Federation, using language that is inconsistent with the principle of respect for the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the territorial integrity of Russia, will be left unanswered."

Crushing the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

The Russian occupation authorities in Zaporizhzhia forcibly closed Ukrainian Greek Catholic parishes not only in Berdyansk (see above).

Fr Peter Krenický, a Greek Catholic priest originally from Slovakia, led the Assumption of St Anna parish in Melitopol in southern Zaporizhzhia Region from 2010 until the Russian occupation forces expelled him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799) to government-held Ukraine in November 2022. He chose to remain with his parish after Russian forces seized the city in late February 2022.

Fr Peter served the morning liturgy at Melitopol's Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church on 25 November 2022, where he noticed two

members of the Russian FSB security service in civilian clothes. "They tried to pretend they were believers, one crossed himself with his right hand, the other with his left, they stood up awkwardly, they knelt," Fr Peter told the Greek Catholic Zhyve TV for an 8 December 2022 programme.

After breakfast with men undertaking building work in the parish, he went into the yard of the parish house. "That's when a car arrived, about six men got out of it, I don't remember exactly, they closed the gate and immediately started beating me," Fr Peter recalled. The men were apparently from Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya). "They pushed me against the wall and beat me, then they beat me in the knees, thank God, I can walk, but they beat me, I don't remember everything anymore." An FSB official told the men to stop beating Fr Peter.

The assailants seized one of the workers and banged his head against the wall until it bled.

The assailants searched the parish house and then beat Fr Peter again. They then ordered him to pack a bag, banning him from putting on his cassock or taking any religious item except a Bible, his breviary and a rosary. He said he believed they were taking him to prison.

The assailants – who Fr Peter says were from the FSB – then put a bag over his head and drove him to a place close to the frontline. Officials checked his passport and handed him to another official, who took his phone and money and then read a statement on camera that the Russian Federation was "deporting" him "because my activity does not support Moscow's policy and I belong to a church that opposes this policy".

After threatening to shoot Fr Peter, the officer ordered him to walk across the frontline to the Ukrainian checkpoint.

Fr Peter said he had tried to prepare his parish for the time when he might not be there. "I told the people that when I'm not here, when I have to leave, continue meeting for prayer, reading the word of God, singing antiphons, troparies and kondaks, and singing the reading. I asked a man from the parish to preach the gospel."

Masked soldiers with automatic weapons seized Fr Peter's colleague, Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz, on the morning of 2 December 2022. "The interrogation went on for an hour," he said in an 8 December 2022 interview (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799) for the Greek Catholic television channel Zhyve. "They loaded me into a car, took me to Vasylivka, and then I walked to our territory."

Crushing Melitopol's Grace Church, Melitopol Christian Church, Word of Life Church

In 2022, the Russian occupation authorities also forcibly closed and seized Protestant churches in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region, including Grace Protestant Church (led by Pastor Mikhail Britsin), Melitopol Christian Church (led by Pastor Viktor Sergeyev) and Word of Life Church (led by Pastor Dmytro Bodyu). Pastor Britsin puts the number of closed Protestant Churches in Melitopol at 13, with 2 Greek Catholic Churches also closed.

"We were interrogated many times by the FSB [Russian security service], who tried to force us to become collaborators," Pastor Britsin told Forum 18 from government-controlled Ukraine on 20 December 2023. "They did not like the fact that our Church openly supports the Ukrainian position, sings and prays in Ukrainian. It was obvious that we do not accept their rules and do not support the occupation. We also provided humanitarian aid to the needy. But this broke the picture for Russian propaganda, which tried to show 'liberation' as a benefit for the people."

Pastor Britsin said Russian officials threatened to arrest him and other ministers and take them to Donetsk, which has been under Russian occupation since 2014.

Armed and masked officials in Russian military uniforms seized Grace Church during Sunday worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) on 11 September 2022.

After the seizure of the church, Russian officials (apparently from the FSB) detained Pastor Britsin, searched his home and took his documents. They gave him two days to leave Russian-occupied territory. "This is a kind of 'soft deportation', as opposed to a 'hard deportation', when you are arrested and without documents and a phone are taken away by force." He left for government-controlled Ukraine in September 2022.

The Russian occupation Culture Ministry took over Grace Church building. They removed the cross from the top of the building, repainted the facade brown, and hung four portraits of soldiers high up on the building's facade (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866). The church library, which contained thousands of books, was burned in the church yard.

Pastor Britsin said Pastor Sergeyev of Melitopol Christian Church left Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Region in early 2022. "After he left, the Russians made this revealing video claiming to have found weapons in his church and home," he told Forum 18. Also

forced to leave Melitopol was Word of Life Church pastor Dmytro Bodyu, who spent five days under arrest.

Seizures of churches have continued. On 23 October 2023, Russian occupation forces seized the Central Baptist Church in Melitopol (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869), a congregation of the Baptist Union.

Artyom Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department insisted to Forum 18 in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866) that only "law-abiding" religious communities are allowed to exist in the parts of the Ukrainian region the occupiers control. He did not answer his phone between 18 and 20 December.

Russia's governor banned four religious communities

On 26 December 2022, the Russian-installed governor of the part of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region under Russian occupation, Yevgeny Balitsky, banned four religious communities. In four separate decrees, he banned Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, Word of Life Protestant Church, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. As of 20 December 2023, nearly one year after Balitsky signed the decrees, they remain on the website of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Region administration.

Russian occupation officials had already forcibly halted the activity of these communities (see above).

Balitsky's four decrees claim that the four Churches "carry out their activity with violations of the legislation on religious and public organisations of the Russian Federation". All four are accused of links with foreign "special services", including with those of the United States (Word of Life). Balitsky accuses members of Grace Church, Word of Life Church, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of participating in "mass disorder and anti-Russian meetings in March and April 2022".

Balitsky specifically accuses Grace Church's pastor Mikhail Britsin of "agitation against the Russian Federation and against the establishment of peaceful life on the territory of Zaporizhzhia Region". He accuses Pastor Viktor Sergeyev of Melitopol Christian Church of storing weapons and radio communication equipment in his home and in the church building.

Balitsky accuses the Greek Catholic Church of storing weapons and explosives in its church, "distributing literature calling for the destruction of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation", and "active participation" in "the activity of extremist organisations and propaganda of neo-Nazi ideas".

Balitsky orders a ban on all four religious communities, the annulment of any property rental agreements, and the seizure of all their movable and immovable property, which is to be handed to the Zaporizhzhia Region Military/Civilian Administration. He also ordered a ban on any registration of these communities under Russian law and banned their leaders from registering any other religious or public organisations under Russian law in Zaporizhzhia Region.

Balitsky orders the seizure of Pastor Sergeyev's personal and family property. He also orders the Russian-controlled police to consider bringing a criminal prosecution against him for allegedly storing weapons.

Balitsky extends the ban on Grace Church to include its Azov Lighthouse recreational centre. He extends the ban on the Greek Catholic Church to include the activity of various branches of the Caritas aid agency, as well as the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal order which he alleged "is connected with the special services of the USA and the Vatican".

Pastor Britsin of Grace Church says he was not informed of the Decree banning his Church. "But how can that change anything?" he told Forum 18. "They have already banned us from holding religious services and taken our property."

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Balitsky signed such sweeping decrees banning the four Churches. Yevgeniya Zaitseva, spokesperson for the Russian occupation Zaporizhzhia Region Administration, did not respond to Forum 18's question on 20 December. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone between 18 and 20 December. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Occupied Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>)

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