

19 January 2024

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk"

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

In occupied Donetsk Region, Russian officials arrested two Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priests, Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui, in September 2023. A court fined both for "missionary activity", ordering their deportation from Russia. Officials illegally took them to Russia, and are holding them in a Deportation Centre near Rostov-on-Don. Bailiff Aleksandr Nikolenko told Forum 18 the priests refused deportation via Latvia as they want to live in Donetsk. "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk, but they can't do so as citizens of another state."

Two priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), fined and ordered deported for violating Russian law on missionary activity in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region in September 2023, have been transferred to Russia. Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui are now in a Deportation Centre for foreigners just outside the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, a Deportation Centre official told Forum 18.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was recognised as canonical by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019. It is separate from the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) and its affiliate in government-held Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).

Gennady Sapunov, an Interior Ministry Rostov Region official in charge of how detainees are held in the Rostov Deportation Centre, told Forum 18: "They won't be freed. Officials will come for them and will take them to the border, where they will cross independently" (see below).

Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, says that Russian officials had been in contact with the authorities in Latvia about the possibility of taking the two priests to the border and sending them across. "The Latvian authorities said they would accept them only if they agreed," he told Forum 18. "But they refused" (see below).

Nikolenko said Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri are Ukrainian citizens. He claimed that they do not want to leave the Russian Federation. Asked if he means that they want to return to their homes in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, he responded: "They want to live in Donetsk" (see below).

Nikolenko said neither priest is willing to accept Russian citizenship. "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk, but they can't do so as citizens of another state," he insisted (see below).

An official of the Deportation Centre in the village of Sinyavskoe in Neklinovsky District said the two men were not allowed visits except by their lawyer, but could receive parcels (see below).

The two priests' Bishop, Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol, said that Russian officials had told the two men that they would face criminal trial on "extremism" charges. "Maybe they were just intimidating them by threatening them with a new trial," he told Forum 18 from government-held Ukraine. Russian officials said they are not aware of any criminal investigation against the two priests (see below).

After detaining the two priests in mid-September 2023, Russian occupation forces held them initially at the Investigation Prison in Donetsk, before transferring them to Russia. Metropolitan Serhy admits he does not have full information on the priests' situation. "There is no transparency from the Russian authorities," he told Forum 18 (see below).

Metropolitan Serhy said that Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri had been arrested in September 2023 by officials of a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) department which controlled religion. "Officials told them that if they renounce the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and repent of their affiliation with it on camera, and transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and undergo re-ordination, they would give them a good parish where they would enjoy a good standard of living," he told Forum 18. Both priests refused (see

below).

It remains unclear why Russian officials, apparently from the FSB, felt they had the right to offer appointments within a religious community. Forum 18 was unable to reach the FSB in Donetsk. Vladimir Savitsky, acting head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 (see below).

Meanwhile, officials of the Russian FSB, Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) and "military counterintelligence" announced on 15 January 2024 that they had raided two empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls in the city of Mariupol in southern Donetsk Region. Jehovah's Witnesses have not used the halls since the Russian seizure of the city in summer 2022 (see below).

Rosgvardiya announced that it had seized more than 20,000 items of literature, but Jehovah's Witnesses expressed scepticism that so many items were held in one Kingdom Hall. "Most of the literature supposedly confiscated was likely taken from numerous other raids on homes or places of worship across the territory or even Russia," they told Forum 18 (see below).

Rosgvardiya and the FSB also claimed that documentation seized in the raids had proved that Jehovah's Witnesses had been involved in financing the Ukrainian armed forces. Jehovah's Witnesses reject these claims (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach officials of the FSB, Rosgvardiya or Russian military counterintelligence. Savitsky of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk refused to say why Russian security agencies had raided the empty Kingdom Halls (see below).

Russia controls about 60 per cent of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. Russian occupation officials insist that Russian law applies to the occupied territories (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808), and that religious communities must have registration under Russian law.

Donetsk Region: Two Orthodox priests detained, fined, ordered "deported"

On 17 September 2023, the Russian occupation authorities in Donetsk Region seized Fr Khristofor (secular name Vyacheslav Khrimli). The following day they seized Fr Andri Chui. Both are priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and are Ukrainian citizens.

Fr Khristofor - an unmarried monk priest - served at Holy Trinity parish in the village of Andriivka as well as the Resurrection of the Lord parish in Kamyanka. This has been in territory occupied by Russian occupation forces since early 2022.

Fr Andri - a married priest - served in Donetsk. The city has been in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) since the area was seized by Russian-backed rebels in 2014 (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>).

Russia illegally annexed Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), as well as the DPR and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on 5 October 2022, following referenda that were widely denounced by the international community.

"Fr Khristofor is a good and very decent man. He was constantly in fasting and prayer. But some people didn't like this," his Bishop, Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol, noted on Facebook after their September 2023 arrest (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869). "All the time Father Andri tried to help the needy and disadvantaged, he was constantly in prayer for his parishioners."

Metropolitan Serhy had to flee Mariupol in southern Donetsk Region on 9 March 2022 amid the Russian assault on the city.

Russian officials appear to have taken the two priests to the Investigation Prison in Donetsk, Metropolitan Serhy told Novosti Donbassa news website on 3 October 2023. He said relatives had been able to hand in medicines, clothes and food to them there.

Metropolitan Serhy said Russian occupation officials had tried to pressure the priests to transfer from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian occupation officials have similarly pressured other religious leaders to transfer to different religious communities which the occupation authorities regard more favourably (see below).

Cases against both priests were prepared under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246)). This incurs a fine of 30,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles with the possibility of deportation. A fine of 50,000 Russian Roubles represents more than two months' average local wages for those in work.

The cases were handed to the District Court in Telmanovo (which Ukraine has renamed Boikivske), in the District where Fr Khristofor was serving.

In separate hearings on 22 September 2023, Telmanovo District Court found Fr Khristofor (under his secular name Vyacheslav Khrimli) and Fr Andri guilty. The Judge punished Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri each with a fine of 30,000 Russian Roubles and "deportation beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation", a court official told Forum 18 on 24 October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869).

According to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti on 3 October 2023, the court decisions said that Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri "carried out religious activity posing as representatives of the religious association the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), whose activity is of an anti-Russian, extremist nature, expressed in public support for the Ukrainian authorities and armed formations of Ukraine, as well as inciting hatred and discord on an ethnic and religious basis".

"The organisation under the name the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was formed by schismatics, and is therefore not a church in the canonical understanding," RIA Novosti claimed in its report on the cases. It did not say if this was its view or whether it was quoting the court decisions.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarch as canonical in 2019. The OCU is separate from the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) and its affiliate in government-held Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). However, the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) does not accept the OCU's status.

On 5 January 2024, Russia's Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) blocked access to the OCU's website across Russia, a move that also applies to Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

On 24 October 2023, a Telmanovo District Court official told Forum 18 that only Fr Andri had appealed against the decision. "Any appeal goes directly to the Supreme Court in Moscow," she told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869). She refused to say whether Fr Khristofor had had time to lodge an appeal before being deported.

However, Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs' Service, told Forum 18 from Rostov on 18 January 2024 that neither priest had appealed against the court decision.

Pressure to change religious affiliation

Metropolitan Serhy said that Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri had been arrested in September 2023 by officials of a Russian FSB department which controlled the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. "Officials told them that if they renounce the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and repent of their affiliation with it on camera, and transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and undergo re-ordination, they would give them a good parish where they would enjoy a good standard of living," he told Forum 18. Both priests refused.

It remains unclear why Russian officials, apparently from the FSB, felt they had the right to offer appointments within a religious community. Forum 18 was unable to reach the FSB in Donetsk. Vladimir Savitsky, acting head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18.

The occupation authorities have pressured other OCU priests - such as Fr Platon Danyshchuk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866) in Kherson Region - to change their affiliation to the Moscow Patriarchate.

The occupation authorities have also pressured other religious leaders to change their affiliation from religious bodies that have their headquarters in government-held Ukraine, or which are perceived to be pro-Ukrainian, to religious bodies that are based in Russia.

Russia's government has used a range of tactics to pressure Russian religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion of Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763). These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who have publicly opposed the war.

In 2022, Russian occupation officials tried to pressure Imam Rustem Asanov, of the Birlik (Unity) Mosque in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region, to cut the community's ties to the Spiritual Administration in Kyiv and subjugate his mosque community to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) in the occupied Ukrainian city of Simferopol.

In addition, occupation authorities have banned some religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses. In December 2022, the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Region governor banned the Greek Catholic Church and three local Protestant Churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882): Grace Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Church.

Illegal transfer to Russia

Soon after the September 2023 court hearings, Metropolitan Serhy said relatives taking items to the prison in Donetsk for Fr

Khristofor and Fr Andri were told they were no longer there. "Then they sent information that they had been taken to the Russian Federation," he told Novosti Donbassa news website on 3 October 2023. He said the diocese had no contact with them.

At an unknown date, Russian officials transferred Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to the foreign citizens' Deportation Centre in the village of Sinyavskoe in Neklinovsky District, 35 kms (20 miles) west of Rostov-on-Don.

The Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-protection-civilian-persons-time-war>) covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (described as "protected persons"). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein."

Russia has frequently violated this provision in occupied Ukrainian territory, for example in Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774).

Vladimir Savitsky, acting head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, repeatedly refused to say why Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri had been punished or why they had been illegally transferred to Russia. "I don't answer questions by phone," he told Forum 18 from Donetsk on 18 January.

Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, denied that the transfer of Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri from Donetsk to Russia represented a violation of international law. "There is no border between Donetsk and the Russian Federation," he claimed to Forum 18.

Priests insist on return to Donetsk

An official of the Deportation Centre in Sinyavskoe was unable to say what would happen to Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri or whether they face renewed prosecution in Russia. "I just deal with documentation," the official told Forum 18 from the Deportation Centre on 16 January.

The official referred all further enquiries about Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Gennady Sapunov, an Interior Ministry Rostov Region official in charge of how detainees are held in the Rostov Deportation Centre.

Sapunov, who is an Interior Ministry Rostov Region official in charge of how detainees are held in the Rostov Deportation Centre, told Forum 18 from nearby Taganrog on 17 January: "They won't be freed. Officials will come for them and will take them to the border, where they will cross independently."

Metropolitan Serhy told Forum 18 that the two priests were due to have been deported on 25 December 2023. However, the deportation was then cancelled as, allegedly, the annual budget for this had been used up and there was no money to buy them tickets. Sapunov did not discuss this.

Sapunov of the Interior Ministry in Rostov Region insisted that a decision on what will happen to the two priests is in the hands of the Rostov Regional branch of the Court Bailiffs' Service. "It is their responsibility to implement court decisions, including on deportation," he told Forum 18. "My job is solely to ensure the conditions of how they are held."

Sapunov refused to speculate on what route might be used to deport Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri. He noted though that some individuals had been sent back to Ukraine.

Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, says that Russian officials had been in contact with the authorities in Latvia about the possibility of taking the priests to the border and sending them across. "The Latvian authorities said they would accept them only if they agreed," he told Forum 18. "But they refused."

Nikolenko said Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri are Ukrainian citizens. He claimed that they do not want to leave the Russian Federation. Asked if he means that they want to return to their homes in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, he responded: "They want to live in Donetsk."

Nikolenko said neither priest is willing to accept Russian citizenship. "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk, but they can't do so as citizens of another state," he insisted.

"Extremism" cases?

Metropolitan Serhy said that Russian officials had told the two priests that they would face criminal trial on "extremism" charges. "Maybe they were just intimidating them by threatening them with a new trial," he told Forum 18.

Gennady Sapunov, an Interior Ministry Rostov Region official in charge of how detainees are held in the Rostov Deportation Centre, says that he is not aware of any criminal investigations into Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri, including on "extremism" charges. "Of course I would know, as I would have been sent documents about this," he told Forum 18.

Sapunov noted that had any such investigation been launched on serious criminal charges, the two men would most likely have been transferred from the Rostov-on-Don Deportation Centre to an Investigation Prison.

Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, similarly said he had heard nothing about any criminal investigation or case against Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri.

"No complaints"

Gennady Sapunov of the Interior Ministry in Rostov Region told Forum 18 that he meets frequently with the two priests at the Deportation Centre in Sinyavskoe. "I am in the centre almost every day," he told Forum 18 on 17 January. "I met Fr Andri yesterday."

Metropolitan Serhy said that Fr Khristofor had been seriously ill with a lung complaint, though noted he has been feeling better recently.

Sapunov said he met Fr Khristofor shortly before "and he had no complaints". Sapunov insisted that the Deportation Centre provides proper medical attention to those in need.

Sapunov maintained that the two priests have the right to exercise freedom of religion or belief "provided it does not interfere with the rights of others". "We can't ban them from conducting their religious rites, as long as they don't disturb others," he added.

The Sinyavskoe Deportation Centre official said Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri were not allowed visits except by their lawyer, but could receive parcels and some phone calls from relatives. "This is the regime here," the official told Forum 18.

Sapunov said the ban on visits to the Deportation Centre was because of "temporary regulations" to prevent visitors bringing in illnesses which could spread among those held at the centre.

Foreigners' detention centre address:

346859 Rostovskaya oblast

Neklinovsky raion

s. Sinyavskoe

Tsentr vremennogo soderzhaniya inostrannikh grazhdan

Religious leaders held for days, weeks, months

Russian occupation forces have seized religious leaders of a variety of faiths since their renewed invasion of Ukraine from February 2022. Greek Catholic priests Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta were disappeared in November 2022. No news has been heard of their fate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867), a representative of the Exarchate told Forum 18 on 17 January 2024. Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov was disappeared (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) in May 2023. Occupation forces have refused to give any news of his fate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882).

It remains unclear in many of the cases whether the seizure of religious leaders was intended to punish them for their exercise of freedom of religion or belief in ways the Russian occupation authorities did not like. However, all those seized were known to play a leading role in their own religious community.

Some leaders were released after days, weeks or even months in Russian custody, such as Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in Mariupol, and his wife Tatyana who were held from 21 September to 21 October 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808).

While in Russian custody, some of the seized religious leaders were subjected to torture. These include Imam Rustem Asanov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), a Crimean Tatar, of the Birlik (Unity) Mosque in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region.

Raid on empty Mariupol Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls

Russian occupation forces raided two empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls in the city of Mariupol in southern Donetsk Region, they announced on 15 January.

Immediately after the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – during which Russian occupation forces seized Mariupol – officials made clear that the 2017 Russian ban on all public exercise by Jehovah's Witnesses of freedom of religion or belief (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) extended to the newly-occupied territory.

In February 2023, officers of Russia's Kherson Regional Police raided the empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Skadovsk in the occupied Kherson Region. This was the fourth known police raid on an empty Kingdom Hall (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2820) in occupied parts of Kherson Region.

The January 2024 raid on the empty Kingdom Hall in the northern part of Mariupol involved officials of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), National Guard (Rosgvardiya) and "military counterintelligence", Russian Telegram channels and media announced on 15 January.

A short video posted on Russian media shows armed and masked men taking materials from the former Kingdom Hall and placing it in a green armoured military truck marked with a V sign (used to distinguish Russian military vehicles during the current war).

"The property has been under Russia's control since the summer of 2022 and the building has not been used by Jehovah's Witnesses since then," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 from government-held Ukraine on 18 January 2024. "It has been used as maintenance facility for the district's electrical system." Jehovah's Witnesses pointed to the video of the raid which shows street lights stored in the building.

Russian occupation forces also raided the empty Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Livoberezhny District of Mariupol. The raid involved officials of the Russian FSB, Rosgvardiya and "military counterintelligence", Rosgvardiya's Telegram channel announced on 15 January.

Rosgvardiya's Telegram channel claimed that it and the FSB had "discovered the building in which books, magazines and electronic devices were being stored with banned information of the extremist Jehovah's Witness organisation". It remains unclear why Rosgvardiya only just "discovered" the Kingdom Hall when its address is public and the building still has a notice on the outside wall that it is a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall.

Rosgvardiya said that officials seized "more than 20,000 copies of extremist publications". Video posted online shows uniformed, armed and masked officials piling up literature on the floor (which was copied from the first video) and a masked military official standing outside the empty Kingdom Hall describing the raid.

Jehovah's Witnesses said claims that 20,000 pieces of literature were being stored there were "fake". They noted that their literature is funded by voluntary donations. "Thus, in practice, Jehovah's Witnesses keep a minimum amount of literature on hand to prevent waste. Most of the literature supposedly confiscated was likely taken from numerous other raids on homes or places of worship across the territory or even Russia."

Rosgvardiya and the FSB also claimed that documentation seized in the raid had proved that Jehovah's Witnesses had been involved in financing the Ukrainian armed forces.

Jehovah's Witnesses reject these claims. "Jehovah's Witnesses are internationally known for being politically neutral," they told Forum 18. "They do not fight in wars or support the military, even in non-combatant roles. It's well-documented that Jehovah's Witnesses would rather suffer in prison than join the military. Some Witnesses have been executed for political neutrality."

Donetsk Region branch of Rosgvardiya is part of Rosgvardiya's Southern District, based in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Officials there on 17 January refused to give Forum 18 contact details for Rosgvardiya in Donetsk or in Mariupol itself. Forum 18 also tried to reach Igor Semilyak, the head of Rosgvardiya in Donetsk Region, but his phone went unanswered.

Forum 18 was unable to reach any officials of the Russian FSB in Donetsk or Mariupol, or Russian military counterintelligence.

Vladimir Savitsky, acting head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, repeatedly refused to say why Russian security agencies had raided the empty Kingdom Halls in Mariupol and seized religious literature. "I don't answer questions by phone," he told Forum 18 from Donetsk on 18 January. (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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