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DONBAS: Luhansk: Community work, fines, property seizure

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

A Baptist leader in Krasnodon hopes to overturn a punishment of 20 hours' community work when the case resumes at the Supreme Court in Luhansk on 21 October. Krasnodon court punished Pastor Vladimir Rytikov for leading an unapproved Sunday worship meeting which police raided in April. Another pastor was fined in October for leading worship in August, which police also raided.

Baptist pastor Vladimir Rytikov is hoping to overturn a sentence of 20 hours' community work handed down to punish him for leading a Sunday meeting for worship without official permission which police raided in April. The case is due to resume at noon on 21 October under Judge Tatyana Minskaya at the Supreme Court of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine.

Pastor Rytikov, who is 60, leads 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. Like all Council of Churches congregations it does not seek official registration (see below).

One of the officers involved in the April raid on the Baptist community, Major Ruslan Volodin, defended it and the subsequent prosecutions. "They meet illegally," he insisted to Forum 18. "Under our laws they must be registered" (see below).

Another leader of the Krasnodon Baptist congregation, Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko, is to appeal to the Supreme Court after he was fined more than a month's average local wage on 7 October after an August police raid on the church's Sunday worship (see below).

In mid-October, court bailiffs started selling off property seized from Pastor Rytikov to meet a 2018 fine for leading unapproved worship meetings which he had refused to pay. Krasnodon's chief bailiff refused to discuss why she and her colleagues were seizing and selling Pastor Rytikov's property (see below).

Pastors Rytikov and Tatarenko sent a message to fellow church members outside the region, thanking them for "your participation in our sorrows and persecutions, and for your prayers" (see below).

The Soviet authorities jailed Vladimir Rytikov from 1979 to 1982 to punish his involvement in a Christian children's summer camp. They also jailed his father Pavel Rytikov, who spent more than a decade behind bars in the Soviet Union to punish his exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

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.

The rebel LPR authorities banned all exercise of freedom of religion or belief by communities that did not gain registration with their Justice Ministry by the extended deadline of 15 October 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462). Those rejected include all Protestant communities.

The Baptist Union reluctantly decided that its congregations could no longer meet publicly for services after the last Sunday worship on 10 March. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462)

Communities which did not apply for registration, such as Jehovah's Witnesses (who knew they would not be accepted) and Council

of Churches Baptists (who choose not to seek registration on principle), are likewise regarded as "illegal".

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 1,930 Ukrainian Hryvnia, 715 Norwegian Kroner, 70 Euros or 80 US Dollars. It represents more than three weeks' local average wages for those in formal work.

As well as the Krasnodon Council of Churches Baptist congregation, several Protestant congregations are known to have been raided in 2019. In two separate cases in March, courts chose not to punish two Protestant pastors (both of them elderly) accused of leading illegal meetings for worship. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467)

In March and again in April, officers of the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime raided and searched Holy Trinity Cathedral in Luhansk belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Officers questioned two priests and banned them from leaving the area (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467). The investigation of one of them continues (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516).

Raid on Krasnodon Baptist worship meeting

On 21 April at least four police officers came to the home in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] where a Council of Churches Baptist congregation meets regularly for worship each Friday, Sunday and on special days.

The officers – who included Major Ruslan Volodin (who wrote up the subsequent report) and Major Oleg Kovalyov - ordered church members to halt their Sunday morning service. They demanded that church members not meet again without official registration.

"They promised that if we still gather they will come to every service and drive us out, and not allow us the possibility of meeting," church members recounted. "We explained that we have been meeting without registration since 1961, that registration of the church of Christ on conditions which contradict the teaching of Christ is impossible, as they would turn church leaders into traitors."

Officials took the names and other details of all those present. They then took three church leaders, including the pastor Vladimir Rytikov, to the police station. The three refused to give the police any statements or sign any documents. "We told them that we don't consider ourselves guilty as, in gathering for common prayer, we are fulfilling God's Will, and that while laws and authorities come and go, God's Word was and remains unchanged. The official representatives didn't like this answer."

Officers fingerprinted and photographed each of the three church leaders before releasing them.

Major Volodin defended the April raid on the Baptist community and the subsequent prosecutions. "They meet illegally," he insisted to Forum 18 from Krasnodon on 16 October. "Under our laws they must be registered." Asked why they have to seek permission to be allowed to worship, he said: "It wasn't me who adopted these laws."

Asked who the Baptists might be harming by meeting for worship in a home without seeking permission, Major Volodin responded: "They've never done me any harm, but if large numbers of people gather they have to seek permission."

First 2019 Krasnodon Baptist prosecution

On 20 May, two police officers came to Pastor Rytikov's house to hand him a record of an offence under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2. They told him the case was being sent to Krasnodon Town and District Court and that he would be punished "for meetings of believers without the authorities' permission".

"All other believers obey the law but you don't want to," one of the officers told Rytikov. "You are not like all the others." He

warned the pastor that for defying the law he would be given a bigger fine than in 2018. "All your property could be confiscated."

When Pastor Rytikov said that God would decide what happens, one of the officers responded: "We'll keep on drawing up records of offences against you."

On 4 June, Pastor Rytikov received a summons to appear at 9am on 12 June at Krasnodon Town and District Court.

At 8am on 12 June, an hour before Pastor Rytikov was due in court, police officers came to his house and took him to the police station and then to court. About 15 church members arrived to support him in the hearing and they were allowed in.

Pastor Rytikov began by asking Judge E. Pridatko if he could pray, which she reluctantly agreed to. She then asked what the church does at its meetings. "We pray, read the Bible, and praise God in song," Pastor Rytikov responded. He then invited the Judge to attend a Sunday service.

Judge Pridatko then asked why the church does not register. Pastor Rytikov explained the church's position that registration contradicts the Bible. As the seven appointed witnesses failed to appear, the Judge adjourned the case until 20 June.

At the 20 June hearing, Judge Pridatko found Pastor Rytikov guilty, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. Given his "lack of repentance or recognition of having committed an offence", she sentenced him to 20 hours of community work.

Telephones at Krasnodon Town and District Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 16 October.

After Pastor Rytikov received the written decision on 9 August, he lodged an appeal to the LPR Supreme Court in Luhansk.

The first Supreme Court hearing was held under Judge Tatyana Minskaya on 8 October, according to court records. About 40 church members attended the court hearing, greeting Pastor Rytikov on the court steps afterwards with flowers.

The hearing is due to continue at noon on 21 October, Judge Minskaya's assistant told Forum 18 from the court on 16 October. The assistant said she was not authorised to put any calls directly through to a judge.

Second 2019 Krasnodon Baptist prosecution

Police raided the Krasnodon Council of Churches congregation again during Sunday worship on 4 August. Rytikov was away and the service was led by the second pastor, Pyotr Tatarenko. "Police surrounded the house and took Pyotr away," fellow Baptists told Forum 18. "They released him later."

Following the raid, officers similarly accused Tatarenko of leading worship without registration or informing the authorities under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2. The case was presented to Krasnodon Town and District Court on 21 August and was initially due to be heard on 26 August, according to the court summons seen by Forum 18.

On 23 September, Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh of Krasnodon Town and District Court finally began hearing the case against Tatarenko. He told the Court that church members regard registration as betrayal of each other. He said a congress of the International Union of Evangelical Christians/Baptists – of which the congregation is a member – adopts a position on registration. The hearing was then adjourned.

On 7 October, Judge Kudrevatykh found Tatarenko guilty and fined him 7,000 Russian Roubles (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble). This represents more than a month's average local wage for those in formal work. He intends to appeal against his conviction to LPR's Supreme Court.

About 35 church members attended the hearing, greeting Tatarenko afterwards on the steps of the court with flowers.

Pastors Rytikov and Tatarenko sent a message to fellow church members outside the region, thanking them for "your participation in our sorrows and persecutions, and for your prayers".

Seized property being sold

In mid-October, Bailiffs started selling off property seized from Pastor Rytikov and his family because of an unpaid 2018 fine, fellow Baptists told Forum 18.

Officials raided the church's regular Sunday meeting for worship in June 2018. Pastor Rytikov refused to pay a fine of 8,000 Russian Roubles (about five weeks' average wages for those in formal work) handed down on 11 July 2018 to punish him for leading an unapproved worship meeting. Krasnodon Town and District Court rejected Pastor Rytikov's appeal against the fine the following month. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425)

In September 2018, court bailiffs opened proceedings to recover the money for the unpaid fine. On 18 October, they came to Pastor Rytikov's home in Krasnodon and summoned him to court that day. There, he told Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh that he had no intention of paying the fine because he does not regard himself as guilty of any wrongdoing.

Judge Kudrevatykh found him guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.26, Part 1 of failing to pay the fine. She handed him an additional punishment of 20 hours' community service. Pastor Rytikov appealed against this extra punishment to the LPR Supreme Court in Luhansk. On 14 November 2018, the court overturned the community service punishment. However, the July 2018 fine remained in force.

On 9 November 2018, four court bailiffs came to Pastor Rytikov's home, going through all the rooms, recording what property he had and taking photographs.

A 28 February 2019 order from court bailiff Yuliya Getman said Pastor Rytikov owed 8,000 Russian Roubles from the unpaid fine, a bailiffs' fee of 800 Russian Roubles and expenses in recovering the money of 185 Russian Roubles. She put a restraining order on his car and ordered him not to dispose of any of his other property.

In a 4 March order, the head of the Krasnodon bailiffs, Natalya Komissarova, ordered Pastor Rytikov to present his car to bailiffs on the morning of 21 March (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462). She warned him that failing to abide by this would constitute an administrative offence with fines of 1,000 to 3,000 Russian Roubles. However, four years earlier Pastor Rytikov gave the car to his son, who does not live in the area.

On 22 March, four court bailiffs raided Pastor Rytikov's home, accompanied by two police officers and two official witnesses. Not finding the car, they seized a bread maker and music centre.

On 4 June, the same day that Pastor Rytikov received notification of his 12 June court hearing, he received a notification that property seized from him in March would be sold. Items due for sale included the bread maker and music centre, according to documents seen by Forum 18.

The head of the Krasnodon bailiffs, Komissarova, refused to discuss the enforced sale of Pastor Rytikov's property. "I have no comment," she told Forum 18 from Krasnodon on 16 October. "I am forbidden from discussing my work with the media." (END)

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(<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=87>)

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If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY