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DONBAS: Luhansk: "The last Mass was in April 2020"

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

Catholics in the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic have been denied a priest and the possibility to receive communion since April 2020, officials giving contradictory reasons for banning the return of Fr Grzegorz Rapa. An Orthodox Church of Ukraine chapel has been ordered closed, and its bishop denied entry. Among religious texts banned as "extremist" are John's Gospel in the Synodal translation and the Jehovah's Witness New World Bible. Officials refuse to explain why. Despite a ban on Protestant meetings for worship, small meetings continue under threat of criminal prosecution.

The rulers of the unrecognised self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine have repeatedly refused applications by the local Roman Catholic community for their priest, Fr Grzegorz Rapa, to be allowed to return to serve the Parish. Fr Rapa, a Polish citizen who has served in Luhansk since 1993, was last able to celebrate Mass there in February 2020.

Fr Rapa left the region on 1 March 2020, intending to return for the remainder of his permitted three-month period. However, the border between the LPR and Ukrainian-controlled Ukraine was then closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The border did not reopen until November 2020, but the entity's rulers did not allow Fr Rapa to return claiming he did not have permanent residence – even though he has lived in Luhansk for 21 years before the LPR was itself proclaimed (see below).

LPR officials have given contradictory explanations for the ban to Forum 18, either claiming that it is due to the coronavirus, that there is no ban, or that he is banned as a "foreigner" (see below).

The last time Roman Catholic Mass was celebrated in the LPR was on 12 April 2020 by a Greek Catholic priest. During 2020 and 2021, Catholics in Luhansk and Stakhanov have gathered on Sundays for prayer services led by laypeople or for online Masses, including by Fr Rapa. However, this means that local Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion – for Catholics an essential part of their faith (see below).

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Luhansk finally gained local registration in September 2019, but only after a long struggle that included officials demanding the names of parishioners. Police visited the homes of some parishioners accusing them of alcoholism, and one registration application was refused with false claims that parishioners had criminal records (see below).

Religious communities which have not gained registration with the rebel authorities – including all Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses - are not allowed to operate. One Protestant from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv with close ties to the region told Forum 18 of a "complete ban on worship meetings". Small groups try to meet "until they get the first complaint from neighbours", with the threat of criminal charges for leading or participating in unapproved meetings for worship (see below).

The unrecognised LPR entity's rulers have also refused to allow the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's then diocesan Bishop, Afanasi (Yavorsky), to visit parishioners. The senior priest at the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's Cathedral in Luhansk, Fr Anatoly Nazarenko, tried to get permission from the rebel authorities in mid-2020, but this was refused. Bishop Afanasi last visited the city in 2014 (see below).

In 2020, LPR officials told the Orthodox Church of Ukraine that it could no longer use its second church in Luhansk, the small Exaltation of the Cross chapel. "Officials said that one church is enough, and told the priest that if he serves there they will jail him," Bishop Afanasi told Forum 18 (see below).

When the unrecognised LPR entity's Justice Ministry updated its "State List of Extremist Materials" on 19 February 2020, it revealed that on 27 July 2018 a further eight books and websites were banned as "extremist". Officials have refused to explain the reasons for the bans to Forum 18 (see below).

In a recent report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted a growing fear among religious communities in the rebel-held parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions. "Representatives of religious communities who had earlier communicated with OHCHR refused to continue their interactions with the Office, fearing possible persecution," noted the OHCHR report, published on 11 March (see below).

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 June 2021 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 June 2021 controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

"Fearing possible persecution"

In a report on the human rights situation in Ukraine covering August 2020 to January 2021, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/31stReportUkraine-en.pdf>) noted that several religious communities in the rebel-held parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions "continued to face limitations on their enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief". It added that the enforcement of local laws "discriminates against a number of religious organizations".

The OHCHR recorded a growing fear among religious communities in the two regions about speaking of restrictions. "Representatives of religious communities who had earlier communicated with OHCHR refused to continue their interactions with the Office, fearing possible persecution," noted the OHCHR report, published on 11 March.

Among its recommendations to the leaderships of the rebel-held parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions was: "Take all necessary steps to ensure that freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, religion or belief can be exercised by all, without discrimination on any grounds."

"I want him to be able to return – he's the parish priest"

The unrecognised LPR entity's rulers have repeatedly refused applications by the local Roman Catholic community for their priest, Fr Grzegorz Rapa, to be allowed to return to serve the Parish. Fr Rapa, a Polish citizen who has served in Luhansk since 1993 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540), was last able to celebrate Mass there in February 2020.

"They simply rejected the application," Bishop Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia, told Forum 18 on 24 May. "They don't want a Catholic priest there. They use all possible means to refuse Fr Rapa entry. We had hopes for Easter [2021], but that didn't work."

The region has two Roman Catholic Parishes, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Luhansk and a smaller Parish in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka].

Fr Rapa is currently serving in a parish elsewhere in the Diocese as he awaits possible return to Luhansk, Bishop Sobilo added. He said the Diocese can maintain contact with parishioners by phone and over the internet, but added that this is no substitute for a resident priest. "I want him to be able to return – he's the parish priest."

Bishop Sobilo would also like to be able to visit parishioners in Luhansk again. "We've been told they will let no one in." He was last able to visit the region together with the then nuncio to Ukraine Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti at Christmas 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540).

Parish's repeated appeals for priest's return rejected

The unrecognised LPR entity's Migration Service last gave Fr Rapa permission to live and serve in Luhansk for three month terms in December 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540). "They gave me only three months," he told Forum 18 on 25 May 2021. "I told them I wanted permission to remain all year." Fr Rapa spoke to the unrecognised LPR entity's Foreign Minister Vladislav Deynego, but the authorities did not change their decision.

Fr Rapa left the region on 1 March 2020, intending to return for the remainder of his three-month period. However, the border between the LPR and Ukrainian-controlled Ukraine was then closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The border did not reopen until November 2020.

Local Catholics tried repeatedly to get permission for Fr Rapa to return throughout 2020. In November 2020, when the border reopened, he arrived at the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point hoping to be allowed in. "I got to the LPR check point but they wouldn't let me in," Fr Rapa told Forum 18. "They told me I could write an appeal to the Foreign Ministry, which I did."

After getting no response, Fr Rapa tried again to enter at the same crossing point in early April 2021, ahead of Easter. Again he was turned away.

On 17 March 2021, Luhansk Catholics had appealed to the unrecognised LPR entity's head Leonid Pasechnik to allow Fr Rapa to return. Pasechnik passed the letter to the entity's Foreign Ministry. Its 7 April response – prepared by Sergei Belov, signed by First Deputy Minister Anna Soroka and seen by Forum 18 – informed local Catholics that a Ministry working group had rejected the application in line with a 10 June 2020 Decree.

The Decree allows in only individuals with residence registration in Luhansk, who have relatives there, or are coming to look after someone who is ill or for medical treatment, education, or the funeral of a close relative.

"We gave no bans to anyone"?

Fr Rapa told Forum 18 that he is prepared to take a coronavirus test and, if necessary, self isolate to be allowed to return safely to Luhansk. He said he had already taken coronavirus tests when returning to Ukraine from visits to his native Poland.

The LPR Foreign Ministry told Forum 18 on 2 June that both Foreign Ministry employee Belov and First Deputy Minister Soroka were away from the office until 7 June. An official insisted that the ban on Fr Rapa's return was dictated by the need to control coronavirus. "There are restrictive measures for those who don't have local registration – people can come in only for a few reasons, such as caring for close relatives," the official who refused to give her name told Forum 18.

The official stated that Fr Rapa "did not gain permanent residence" – even though he has lived and served in Luhansk since 1993 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516) for 21 years before the LPR was declared in 2014.

An official of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the unrecognised LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry insisted that she did not know why Fr Rapa had been denied re-entry. "We gave no bans to anyone," the official, who did not give her name, told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 24 May. "I don't have reasons [for the ban], but he's a foreigner. Ask the Foreign Ministry." She refused to discuss anything else and put the phone down.

Orthodox Bishop repeatedly denied entry

The senior priest at the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's Cathedral in Luhansk, Fr Anatoly Nazarenko, most recently tried to get permission for the then diocesan Bishop, Afanasi (Yavorsky), to visit Luhansk in mid-2020, the Bishop told Forum 18 on 27 May 2021. However, the rebel authorities again refused permission.

Bishop Afanasi, who was based in the Ukrainian government controlled part of Luhansk Region, headed the Luhansk and Starobilsk Diocese from 2013 until his transfer to the Odessa Diocese on 26 May 2021. He last visited Luhansk in 2014.

"The last Mass was in April 2020"

The last time Mass was celebrated in the Catholic Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Luhansk was on 12 April 2020, Fr Rapa noted. The Greek Catholic priest from Donetsk Fr Mikhaylo Zaverchuk – who serves in both the Byzantine and Latin rites – was able to visit the Parish for Easter 2020. However, he has not been able to visit Luhansk since then. (Relations between the rebel leaderships of Donetsk and Luhansk worsened in 2020.)

During 2020 and 2021, Catholics in Luhansk and Stakhanov have gathered on Sundays for prayer services led by laypeople or for online Masses, including by Fr Rapa. However, this means that local Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass.

When the Greek Catholic priest is able to visit Luhansk, Roman Catholics can also attend Greek Catholic Liturgy in their church. The Greek Catholic priest is able to enter the region as he has local registration, but does not live there permanently as his wife and family live elsewhere in Ukraine.

Earlier registration problems

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Luhansk finally gained local registration with the LPR Justice Ministry in September 2019, Fr Rapa told Forum 18.

Officials had told the Parish in 2018 that under a Decree, it would be impossible for the Parish to continue to function without re-registration. 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462).

Officials demanded that the Catholic parish submit personal details of each parishioner with the application. With the help of Bishop Sobilo and the Vatican Nuncio, the Parish asked if it could gain registration on the same terms as the Russian Orthodox Church

(Moscow Patriarchate)'s local communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425), without requiring parishioners' personal details to be submitted. Officials agreed, but the Parish did not get registration.

"It seems this was to intimidate us"

Ahead of the re-registration deadline of October 2018, Fr Rapa visited the then Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry. Officials there told him that the personal information of all parishioners needed to be submitted with the application.

"I asked Bishop Sobilo about this, as I didn't want to take the decision myself," Fr Rapa told Forum 18. "He said we needed parishioners' permission."

Fr Rapa then held a parish meeting. Some parishioners agreed to allow their details to be submitted, and on 15 December 2018 the Parish submitted its application. LPR officials had already told Fr Rapa that they would register the Parish if he was not the priest and the Parish had no links to Ukraine.

Police then visited the homes of some of the parishioners whose names were on the application. "Officers accused some of them of alcoholism – people were afraid," Fr Rapa noted. "Police then came to the church just before Christmas [2018] and halted Sunday Mass, telling us we were breaking the law. We told them we had submitted our registration application." Police summoned soldiers, and they photographed all those present.

Police drew up a record of an offence against the Parish, but no case was initiated. "It seems this was to intimidate us."

On 24 December 2018, officials phoned the Parish and banned the Christmas Mass. "I didn't tell the parishioners and the Mass went ahead, with no problem," Fr Rapa told Forum 18. On 29 December 2018 officials sent a written ban on further meetings for worship. Representatives of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe visited soon after, and took photographs of the written ban.

In early 2019, LPR officials issued a written rejection of the Parish's registration application, alleging that some of the signatories had criminal records. "None had a criminal record," Fr Rapa insists. "I asked them to go to the police to get a document to say they did not have a criminal record."

Registration finally granted

Nuncio Gugerotti and Bishop Sobilo were given permission to visit Luhansk in February 2019. LPR Foreign Minister Deynego promised them that the Parish would be given registration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). Fr Rapa again submitted the registration application.

It was only in September 2019 that the Justice Ministry gave the Parish registration.

Orthodox church ordered closed

In 2020, officials told the Orthodox Church of Ukraine that it could no longer use its second church in Luhansk, the Exaltation of the Cross. This small roughly 5 meters long chapel was built in 2000 just south of the city centre, before the then-Kyiv Patriarchate (now Orthodox Church of Ukraine) Holy Trinity Cathedral was built in 2013 in the south-west of the city.

In April 2019 anti-"extremism" police raided and searched the Holy Trinity Cathedral (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467) and diocesan offices in Luhansk.

"Officials said that one church is enough, and told the priest that if he serves at the Exaltation of the Cross Church they will jail him," Bishop Afanasi told Forum 18. Meetings for worship at the Cathedral continue.

"Complete ban on worship meetings"

Religious communities which have not gained registration with the LPR's rulers are not allowed to operate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2540). These have from October 2018 included all Protestant churches, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425).

One Protestant from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv with close ties to the region told Forum 18 on 26 May of a "complete ban on worship meetings". Small groups try to meet "until they get the first complaint from neighbours", with the threat of criminal charges for leading or participating in meetings for worship which do not have the LPR rulers' permission.

Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 that their communities have not been fined since 2019 for meeting for worship without

permission.

After a June 2018 police raid on Sunday worship Council of Churches Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – was fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401), and he was fined again in June 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539). Following an August 2019 police raid on Sunday worship Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko was fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). Pastor Rytikov was in January 2020 threatened with criminal charges of "extremism" for refusing to stop leading his congregation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539).

Unpublished decisions ban religious materials as "extremist"

On 26 November 2019, the unrecognised LPR entity's rulers banned 12 Baptist books as "extremist", including an edition of the Gospel of John in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). The books were placed on the Justice Ministry's "State List of Extremist Materials". Officials refused to say why the books are "extremist" and what will happen to those found with them. The ban came a week after the Supreme Court overturned a court order to destroy seized Baptist books.

On 19 February 2020 the LPR entity's Justice Ministry updated its "State List of Extremist Materials" again, revealing that a 27 July 2018 Council of Ministers decision had banned a further eight books and websites.

The 2018 and 2019 decisions themselves have not been published, with one government official describing it to Forum 18 in 2019 as a "secret document for official use and for limited distribution" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). It remains unclear therefore why such books are regarded as "extremist" and who made this decision.

The books and texts banned in July 2018 included "Gospel Field", a journal that used to be published by the Ukrainian Baptist Union, and a translation of the book "Hitler's Cross" by American Protestant pastor Erwin Lutzer. This book discusses, among other topics, why churches in Nazi Germany did not protest against the Holocaust.

In July 2018, the LPR State Security Ministry announced on its website (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401) that it had banned the "destructive activity of the extremist religious organisation the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian/Baptist Churches". The Ministry claimed that the Baptist Union "with its headquarters in Kyiv" had refused to submit to compulsory state registration locally.

The other six items banned in July 2018 were Jehovah's Witness publications, including their New World version of the Bible, the magazines "Awake!" and "The Watchtower", and their website jw.org, together with the JW Library mobile app.

The LPR entity's Justice Ministry press office said it did not have the texts of these decisions. "I have nothing," the official who answered the phone told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 2 June 2021. "I don't have these texts." She would not discuss why the books and texts were banned.

An LPR official handling publication of official texts – who refused to give her name - told Forum 18 on 2 June: "If decisions are authorised for publication they are published on the website. If they are not authorised for publication, they will not be published." She too declined to discuss the reasons for banning the books and texts. (END)

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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