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DONBAS: Luhansk: More Christian texts "extremist", Catholic priests banned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

After officials in the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic apparently seized Christian literature from local Baptists, Sverdlovsk court declared four Protestant books "extremist". Acting Deputy General Prosecutor Roman Gubaydulin put the phone down when asked why he lodged the suit. The books are among 18 Protestant and 6 Jehovah's Witness publications on the "State List of Extremist Materials". "Parishioners in Luhansk are very sad and pained that they have no priest," says Catholic priest Grzegorz Rapa, still unable to return. Officials at the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point refused entry to the new bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's local diocese.

A court in the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine declared four more Protestant books "extremist" in May at the request of the General Prosecutor's Office. The Justice Ministry added them in July to the "State List of Extremist Materials". The General Prosecutor's Office claimed the court ruling would ensure the "effective prevention" of the distribution of such "extremist" materials by local Council of Churches Baptists.

A 20 July statement on the General Prosecutor's Office website claimed that the suit against the Council of Churches Baptists was "in the interests of an undetermined circle of people and the Luhansk People's Republic". It noted (correctly) that Council of Churches Baptists conduct their activity in the region without Justice Ministry registration (see below).

Forum 18 reached Roman Gubaydulin, the acting Deputy General Prosecutor who lodged the suit to have the books declared "extremist", but he put the phone down immediately after questions were asked. No subsequent calls were answered (see below).

A senior aide at Sverdlovsk's Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 that the General Prosecutor's Office lodged the suit to have the four books banned as "extremist" after it found them "on our territory, but I'm not informed as to where" (see below).

Officials at Sverdlovsk City and District Court refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Natalya Afonicheva, who ruled the books "extremist" on 18 May (see below).

Of the 26 items on the updated LPR "State List of Extremist Materials", 18 are published by Protestants (including the 4 latest additions, as well as a Baptist-published edition of the Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John), and 6 are Jehovah's Witness-published. The Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John has been published in many editions and is also widely used by Orthodox, Protestants and others (see below).

Meanwhile, despite repeated requests to the LPR authorities, Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia, says there has been no success in returning Luhansk's Catholic priest Fr Grzegorz Rapa to his parish, which he had to leave in February 2020. "Parishioners in Luhansk are very sad and pained that they have no priest – it is clear discrimination," Fr Rapa told Forum 18. He said that after his return to Ukraine in the autumn, he will try again to get permission to return to his parish (see below).

"The authorities [in Luhansk] won't reply to our requests," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. He added that the Diocese fears it is "all over" for Fr Rapa's chances of being allowed to return. "There is no agreement for another priest either" (see below).

The last Roman Catholic Mass in Luhansk was in April 2020. Local Roman Catholics have had to go to the Greek Catholic priest for confession. He holds services in the Eastern Rite only, which differs from the Mass Roman Catholics use (see below).

The unrecognised LPR entity has also denied entry to bishops of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Diocese of Luhansk and Starobilsk. Bishop Lavrenty (Migovich), who took up his duties in May, went in mid-July to the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point, hoping to be allowed to travel to visit his parishes in Luhansk. However, officials on the LPR side refused to allow him entry. "They said they had no instructions to allow me in," Bishop Lavrenty told Forum 18. "I will go sooner or later. It's my duty, as the parishes there come under my pastoral care" (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). Heavy fighting ensued. The LPR 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 DPR rebel administration currently controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The DPR-held area adjoins the LPR-held area of Ukraine's 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 LPR 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.

Books apparently seized, "extremism" suit

Roman Gubaydulin, the acting Deputy General Prosecutor, who is based in Luhansk, lodged a suit to Sverdlovsk City and District Court in spring 2021 to have four Protestant books declared "extremist" and banned. The books had apparently been seized from Council of Churches Baptists in or near the eastern town of Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk], close to the border with Russia.

The four books – all in Russian and published in Russia or Germany – are "Jesus Our Destiny", by German Lutheran pastor Wilhelm Busch, "The Door is Open" by English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, "Cursed to be?" by German Protestant Wolfgang Bühne, and "Born to Die" by US Protestant Billy Graham. Acting Deputy General Prosecutor Gubaydulin identified them as being linked to Council of Churches Baptists.

A 20 July statement on the General Prosecutor's Office website claimed that Gubaydulin had lodged the suit against the Council of Churches Baptists "in the interests of an undetermined circle of people and the Luhansk People's Republic". It noted (correctly) that Council of Churches Baptists conduct their activity in the region without Justice Ministry registration.

The General Prosecutor's Office statement then claimed that Council of Churches Baptists "actively use and distribute printed materials containing elements of extremism". It indicated that the books "incite religious discord", contain "propaganda of exceptionalism, superiority and inadequacy of the individual on the basis of religious adherence or attitude to religion", and "violate the rights, freedoms and legal interests" of others "depending on their religious adherence or attitude to religion".

Forum 18 reached acting Deputy General Prosecutor Gubaydulin on 26 July, but he put the phone down immediately after questions were asked. No subsequent calls were answered.

A senior aide at Sverdlovsk's Prosecutor's Office said the suit had been brought by the General Prosecutor's Office without the involvement of the local Prosecutor's Office. "It was not our inspection, and not our follow-up action," the aide, who did not give her name, told Forum 18 from Sverdlovsk on 26 July. "They [General Prosecutor's Office] have wide powers to conduct inspections and bring cases."

The aide said that the General Prosecutor's Office lodged the suit to have the four books banned as "extremist" after it found the books "on our territory, but I'm not informed as to where".

The duty officer at Sverdlovsk Police refused to tell Forum 18 on 28 July if local police had been involved in any actions against local Baptists.

"Extremism" ruling

An initial hearing of acting Deputy General Prosecutor Gubaydulin's suit was held at Sverdlovsk City and District Court under Judge Natalya Afonicheva on 19 April. At a second hearing on 18 May, the Judge upheld the suit and declared the four books "extremist", according to court records. Forum 18 asked the court in writing on 26 July for a copy of the decision, but has had no response by the end of the working day in Luhansk of 28 July.

It appears that someone tried to challenge the suit, but Judge Afonicheva appears to have rejected this on 11 May. Officials at Sverdlovsk City and District Court refused to give details. "We have no right to give information by telephone," a court official told Forum 18 on 26 July. She also refused to put Forum 18 through to Judge Afonicheva.

It also appears that no one appealed against the 18 May declaration that the four Protestant books are "extremist". No appeal appears to be listed at Luhansk's Supreme Court and the General Prosecutor's Office announced on 20 July that the decision had come into force.

"The recognition of the printed publications as extremist has allowed for the effective prevention of the activity of [Baptists'] participation in distributing materials containing elements of extremism," the General Prosecutor's Office statement claimed, "at the same time defending the interests of the younger generation and securing the safety of the Republic."

Forum 18 has been unable to find out what happened to the four books following the court decision. Asked if the books would have been destroyed, the Sverdlovsk Prosecutor's Office aide said only that "there is a procedure – I don't know what they did". An official at Sverdlovsk Bailiffs Office told Forum 18 on 26 July that it had received no instructions related to the case.

An official of the Culture Department of Sverdlovsk Administration, which controls religion locally, said she had not seen the 18 May court decision. "The decision would have been sent to the organ that lodged the suit," she told Forum 18 on 26 July.

Asked if local Baptists or others had faced searches or fines, the Culture Department official said she could not recall any. "We would probably know if there were," she said. She insisted that there are no registered Baptists in the District. "We have only Russian Orthodox and one Muslim community." She would not discuss other religious communities which choose (like Council of Churches Baptists) to live without registration or have been denied registration.

In March 2019, police raided the Sunday meeting for worship of a Protestant community in Sverdlovsk. Officials then brought charges against Pastor Nikolai Muratov, who is in his seventies. Later that month, Sverdlovsk City and District Court decided not to punish him (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467). Local Jehovah's Witnesses had earlier faced threats and at least one fine.

Natalya Zaitseva, an official of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the unrecognised LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, said she was not aware of the court decision to ban the four Protestant books as "extremist" and has not seen the court decision. "I'm hearing about this for the first time from you," she told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 27 July.

Zaitseva refused to discuss why other religious books and materials have been banned as "extremist". "I have only been here a week," she told Forum 18. She said the Sector's chief specialist Yury Ragulin was away until mid-August.

Expanding "State List of Extremist Materials"

Following the May court decision in Sverdlovsk, the Justice Ministry added the four "extremist" Protestant books to its "State List of Extremist Materials".

The updated list, dated 2 July but published on the Justice Ministry website only later in the month, now contains 26 items. Eighteen are published by Protestants (including the 4 latest additions, as well as a Baptist-published edition of the Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John), and 6 are Jehovah's Witness-published. The Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John has been published in many editions and is also widely used by Orthodox, Protestants, and others.

The LPR Council of Ministers banned the six Jehovah's Witness materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661) (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) in a July 2018 decision. Also banned at the same time was a Ukrainian Baptist Union magazine and a Christian book.

The LPR's rulers banned 12 Council of Baptists publications (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531) (including the Gospel of John in the Russian Synodal translation) in a November 2019 decision.

No decisions ruling that these 24 religious books and materials are "extremist" have been published.

Forum 18 tried to get copies of the "extremism" rulings on the Jehovah's Witness and Christian materials in June 2021. A Justice Ministry official told Forum 18 she did not have them. Another official handling publication of official texts told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661): "If decisions are authorised for publication they are published on the website. If they are not authorised for publication, they will not be published."

Banished Catholic priest – no other Catholic priest allowed

Despite repeated requests to the LPR authorities, Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia, says there has been no success in returning Luhansk's Catholic priest Fr Grzegorz Rapa to his parish. "The authorities [in Luhansk] won't reply to our requests," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18 from government-controlled Ukraine on 27 July. "We feel it is all over for him. There is no agreement for another priest either."

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 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 LPR entity's rulers did not allow Fr Rapa to return (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661). They claimed he did not have permanent residence – even though he has lived in Luhansk for 21 years before the LPR was itself proclaimed.

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661), 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.

Bishop Sobilo said the Greek Catholic priest can still serve in Luhansk, and he hears confessions for Roman Catholics also. He holds services in the Eastern Rite only, which differs from the Mass Roman Catholics use.

"Parishioners in Luhansk are very sad and pained that they have no priest – it is clear discrimination," Fr Rapa told Forum 18 from his native Poland on 27 July. "I too suffer greatly from this." He said that after his return to Ukraine in the autumn, he will try again to get permission to return to his parish in Luhansk.

"All we have is online contact with local Catholics," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. "I want to go there myself to serve the people." He noted that the previous nuncio had been able to visit Luhansk with him at Christmas 2019. "The new nuncio Visvaldas Kulbokas is not yet in place." Fr Kulbokas is not expected to take up his post until after his consecration as a bishop in Vilnius on 14 August.

Natalya Zaitseva of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk appeared not to have heard of Fr Rapa. She told Forum 18 that she does not know why the Roman Catholic parish is without a priest.

"They said they had no instructions to allow me in"

As well as barring re-entry to Fr Rapa since March 2020 and Bishop Sobilo since Christmas 2019, the unrecognised LPR entity has also denied entry to bishops of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Diocese of Luhansk and Starobilsk. The then-Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) – who had not visited Luhansk since 2014 - tried again to visit his parish in Luhansk in mid-2020 but the rebel authorities again refused permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661).

New Bishop Lavrenty (Migovich), who took up his duties on 24 May, went to the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point in mid-July, hoping to be allowed to travel to visit his parishes in Luhansk. However, officials on the LPR side refused to allow him entry. "They said they had no instructions to allow me in," Bishop Lavrenty told Forum 18 on 28 July. "They said they don't take these decisions." He added that he will try "more officially" soon.

Bishop Lavrenty said that the Diocese is "still separated", but insisted: "I will go sooner or later. It's my duty, as the parishes there come under my pastoral care."

"Unable to comment" on communities banned from meeting for worship

Zaitseva said she was "unable to comment" on why the Luhansk authorities have banned many religious communities from functioning – including congregations of the Ukrainian Baptist Union (banned as a "destructive" and "extremist" organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401) in July 2018) – as well as banning all meetings for worship without registration, including of Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Zaitseva was similarly "unable to comment" on why individuals are fined and threatened for holding meetings for worship without permission. (END)

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