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DONBAS: Luhansk: Religious freedom survey, February 2022

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Freedom of religion and belief is severely restricted in the rebel Luhansk People's Republic occupying currently (February 2022) about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region. Forum 18's survey analysis documents violations including: rendering illegal all Protestant and non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox communities; a climate of fear about discussing human rights violations; repeated denials of permission to a Roman Catholic priest to live in the region; and increasing numbers of banned allegedly "extremist" books, including an edition of the Gospel of John published in 1820.

All human rights including the freedom of religion and belief are severely restricted in the rebel self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), which currently (February 2022) controls about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region. Among the rebels' violations documented by Forum 18 are:

- a restrictive 2018 LPR Religion Law which imposed re-registration of religious communities which were already registered under Ukrainian law, as well as making illegal any religious community which did not gain rebel permission to exist. This resulted in all Protestant and non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox communities being denied rebel permission to exist;
- punishments for meeting for worship without rebel permission;
- the banning by the State Security Ministry (SSM) secret police of all Ukrainian Baptist Union communities, despite this being illegal under LPR law as no court order was apparently made;
- repeated raids on places of worship and unregistered religious communities being denied access to any buildings they own;
- social welfare activities carried out by unregistered religious communities being stopped;
- surveillance of local religious communities, and the encouragement by LPR rebels of a climate of fear about discussing human rights violations;
- cutting off gas, water, and electricity supplies to all places of worship owned by unregistered communities;
- contacts with fellow believers of any faith elsewhere in Ukraine being made difficult or impossible, including repeated denials of permission to a Catholic priest resident in Luhansk since 1993 to continue to live in the region, as well as to nuns to return to a parish. This has resulted in the repeated inability of Catholics to receive Communion at Mass, a central part of the Catholic faith;
- and an increasing list of banned allegedly "extremist" books, including an edition of the Gospel of John originally published in 1820.

Context

Amid heavy fighting, pro-Russian rebels seized parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region in March 2014. In April the rebels proclaimed what they called the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), which was not recognised by any United Nations (UN) member state until Russia recognised the LPR on 21 February 2022. Fighting with Ukrainian government forces continues, and the LPR rebel administration in February 2022 controls about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region.

Different pro-Russian rebels in adjoining Ukrainian territory also seized parts of Ukraine's Donetsk Region in April 2014. They proclaimed what they called the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), and fighting with Ukrainian government forces continues. The DPR was not recognised by any UN member state until Russia recognised it on 21 February 2022, and it currently controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region.

The size of population within the approximately one third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region controlled by LPR rebels is difficult to estimate, as many refugees have fled since 2014 to other parts of Ukraine and other countries. The Ukrainian government's

Statistical Service estimates that in December 2021 over 2 million people lived in all of Luhansk Region, and rebels claimed in January 2020 to control nearly 1 and a half million people. Increasing fears in January and February 2022 of a further Russian invasion of Ukraine have caused even more people to flee from the region.

The religious communities that are currently thought to exist within the LPR-controlled areas are the separate communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate and Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) churches, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and Hare Krishna devotees.

Serious human rights violations have been noted by Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/eastern-donbas/freedom-world/2022>) in both rebel-controlled parts of Ukraine. Human Rights Watch has documented the torture of female detainees (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/05/ukraine-torture-ill-treatment-armed-groups-east>).

Many people within the rebel-controlled areas are afraid to discuss human rights violations, for fear of reprisals from the rebel administrations. 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 2021.

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."

Raids and bans

The self-declared and internationally unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) has regularly – even before it passed a Religion Law - halted worship meetings by a range of religious communities, seized religious literature, and fined religious leaders. Raids have usually involved the State Security Ministry (SSM) secret police and the police.

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 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council on 2 February 2018.

In a typical example of a raid even before the Religion Law came into force, on 14 October 2017 Jehovah's Witness Vladimir Safarov was meeting with up to 30 others behind closed doors in a flat in the town of Chervonopartizansk [official Ukrainian name Voznesenivka]. The flat belonged to an 84-year-old, and the group was meeting for "friendly association, prayer and Bible reading", Safarov insisted.

Police and SSM secret police officers raided the flat and took four of those present, including Safarov, to the police station. Officers pressured the four to sign statements prepared by the police, even though they disagreed with what the police had written. Safarov stated that being "severely intimidated by the aggressive actions" of the police and SSM he reluctantly signed the statement, even though he did not agree with it. He was fined 5,000 Russian Roubles under LPR Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 1 ("Violation by organisers of public events of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets") on 27 November 2017.

Andrei Litsoev, the then head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry was present in court as a "specialist". He insisted that all meetings require permission, regardless of what organisation is holding them, and police and security agencies need to be informed. He set out registration requirements, adding that "conducting any events of a religious nature on private land is impermissible".

Ukrainian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priest Fr Aleksii Slyusarenko was also present in court as a "specialist". He was then a theology lecturer at Luhansk National University, and insisted that Safarov should be found guilty of holding a religious meeting without the rebel authorities' permission.

Punishments for worship meetings without rebel permission

LPR courts have generally punished 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.

LPR 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 more than a week's local average wage for those in formal work.

Religion Law

The Religion Law came into force on 17 February 2018 and imposed compulsory registration – in other words applying for permission to exist - on all religious communities. Those that had registration under Ukrainian law but fail to regain it from the LPR "will be considered to have halted their activity".

Article 3 allows restrictions when deemed necessary "to secure the defence of the country and the security of the state".

Although the Law claims to require that all religious communities are treated equally, Article 6 requires that Orthodox communities "have compulsory diocesan registration" and that the dioceses "are recognised by Ecumenical Orthodoxy within the framework of the canonical territory of the Moscow Patriarchate".

This provision seems designed to prevent non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox parishes from seeking registration, including the Old Believers.

After initially closing all its eight churches in the city of Luhansk and 10 more in rebel-held areas in 2014, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate was allowed to reopen its Holy Trinity Cathedral in Luhansk for Christmas on 7 January 2015. In 2014, church members had successfully resisted an attempt by armed men to seize it to use as a barracks.

A second church in the city reopened soon after, "but services don't take place there regularly because of constant threats from drunken fighters to throw grenades at the church", Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk told Forum 18 on 7 August 2020. (Bishop Afanasi joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine formed in January 2019, but by 2021 the Luhansk parishes had decided to remain with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate.)

The Religion Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for the rebel authorities' permission to exist, but the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate applied for registration for its Luhansk cathedral in 2019. Officials refused to consider the application as the documents, including the Church's charter, were in Ukrainian not Russian.

No non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches had by February 2022 been registered by the rebel LPR authorities.

Another registration obstacle is that any community seeking registration has to be approved by an "Expert Commission of State Religious Studies Expert Analysis", initially created as a Council in September 2017.

Local religious organisations need at least 20 or 30 adult citizens living in one district of the LPR to apply for registration (Articles 6 and 7 give different numbers). A registration application has to include their names and personal data. Centralised religious organisations need at least five registered local congregations.

"Procedures for mandatory registration of all religious organizations limit freedom of religion or belief and create protection concerns for parishioners," the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine

16 May to 15 August 2018 (A/HRC/37/CRP.1 (https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/ReportUkraineMay-August2018_EN.pdf)) stated.

Many communities fear the consequences of giving personal data on their founders to the rebel authorities. "The registration process .. requires the submission of personal data of the founders of the organizations," the OHCHR added. "Some parishioners do not want the 'authorities' to know of their participation in a certain religious organization."

The Law also imposes state registration of all religious literature, which – once approved by the rebel authorities – can be distributed only by religious communities among their own members, and must have the religious community's full name on it.

The rebel authorities initially imposed a six month deadline - until 18 August 2018 – for all religious communities to re-register under the new Religion. Article 33, Part 1 of the Law stated that communities which fail to re-register by then "are deemed to have ceased their activity in the territory of the Luhansk People's Republic". The rebel authorities also 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.

On 20 August the LPR People's Council amended the Religion Law to extend the re-registration period from 18 August to 15 October 2018. The amendment, which was published on 22 August, reaffirmed that any activity by religious communities that failed to get re-registration by 15 October would be illegal.

Andrei Litsoev, the then head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, refused to say how many religious communities applied for re-registration, how many received such re-registration, and how many were refused and why. "I can't talk to you without authorisation from my superiors," he told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 18 October 2018. He also refused to explain what action officials will take against those meeting for worship without rebel permission.

Officials of the rebels' Justice Ministry, Interior Ministry and General Prosecutor's Office refused to speak to Forum 18.

Repeated raids

Repeated raids on places of worship and the re-registration denials left many communities in a state of uncertainty. For example, on 10 June 2018 LPR rebel police raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship of 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.

Officers told church members that under Religion Law Article 9 religious communities are banned from meeting unless they have the compulsory state registration. Officers ordered that church members disperse immediately, local Baptists told Forum 18, and questioned Pastor Vladimir Rytikov and several other church members. They were warned that until the church gets registration it is banned from meeting. "If they still continue to meet, they will be taken to court, fined and the house where they hold services will be sealed," Baptists quoted the police as telling them.

"We will continue to meet just as we have been meeting up till now," church members told the police. "Christ's commandments, recorded in the Bible, are for us higher than human laws. And we cannot fulfil laws which contradict Holy Scripture because we serve God, Who is the highest power over all living creatures."

On 11 July 2018, Krasnodon Town and District Court found Pastor Rytikov guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 because he "conducted public events without submitting notification under the established procedure for conducting public events". The judge fined him 8,000 Russian Roubles (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble). This represents about two weeks' average local wages for those in formal work.

On 19 October 2018, court bailiffs came to Pastor Rytikov's home and summarily handed him a punishment of 20 hours' community service for refusing to pay the July fine. On 28 August, the Chair of Krasnodon Town and District Court, Judge Anton Lagutin, rejected Pastor Rytikov's appeal against the fine.

In another typical case, on 30 September 2018 about 12 police officers in the southern town of Krasny Luch [official Ukrainian name Khrustalny] raided the Sunday morning meeting of Revival Baptist Church, fellow Baptists told Forum 18. SSM secret police officers took part in the raid.

The duty officer at Krasny Luch Police refused to put Forum 18 through to the head, Lieutenant-Colonel Roman Shulga. "You can only talk in person to the head," he told Forum 18 on 22 October 2018. The duty officer also insisted that the police "never raid anyone".

More than 25 church members had gathered for worship in their church, led by Pastor Dmitry Sirbu. Officers halted the worship service, claiming that the community did not have the necessary documents allowing them to function as a religious organisation. They sent most church members home. They questioned Pastor Sirbu in a separate room, as well as questioning other church members individually.

Officers tried to force open the church's safe, but Pastor Sirbu told them they were acting illegally. He said there was nothing of significance in the safe. However, officers then forced the safe open by drilling through the lock. They found a pillow, a blanket and some invoices for church expenses.

Officers then took Pastor Sirbu to the town branch of the SSM secret police for questioning and then to the ordinary police. Officers told him he had violated the Administrative Code and that a case against him had been handed to court. No court hearing then took place.

The duty officer at the SSM secret police in Krasny Luch told Forum 18 on 23 October 2018 that there was no SSM involvement in the raid and questioning. "You're mistaken. You have distorted information. No one sent anyone there." The officer repeatedly refused to explain what he thought happened at the Baptist Church on 30 September.

Social welfare activities have been targeted as well as meetings for worship. On 9 June 2018, armed men – two of them wearing masks - broke into the youth centre of the Baptist Union church in the village of Gorodyshche near Perevalsk. They arrived soon after a medical session had begun, provided by four volunteer doctors (a therapist, neuropathologist, ophthalmologist, and urologist) and two medical students. This was part of a Church-led project to help everyone in the area.

The armed men – who refused to identify themselves or show any document - halted the medical session and forced the patients to leave, telling them that such medical treatment was an administrative offence. They then forced the doctors to write statements, and then seized the medical equipment, including an ocular diagnostic kit, cardiograph and ultrasound. No documentation of the confiscation was given to the doctors.

The SSM secret police and the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk both refused to discuss the repeated raids, bans on meetings for worship, and fines of religious leaders at court hearings then Department head Litsoev attended.

Registration denials, bans

All Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Pentecostal, and other Protestant communities were denied re-registration under the Religion Law. "Unfortunately the situation for all Protestant churches is bad," a Protestant from a different community in contact with fellow church members in the region told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on 14 March 2019. "We do not have registration in the LPR and do not have the right to meet in our buildings, which have been closed."

Most of the 44 local Baptist communities which were part of the Ukrainian Baptist Union lodged re-registration applications. However, all had their applications refused, a Baptist told Forum 18.

One such Baptist re-registration rejection came in a late September 2018 one-page "conclusion of a state religious studies expert analysis", signed by Litsoev of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry and seen by Forum 18. It said the "expert commission" had found violations of Article 18 of the Religion Law in the documents the Baptist congregation had submitted.

The conclusion did not specify in what way the congregation's documents had violated these provisions. It merely stated that in view of this the registration of the congregation was "inadmissible".

As the re-registration process was going on, on 26 July 2018, the SSM secret police announced on its website that it had banned the "destructive activity of the extremist religious organisation the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian/Baptist Churches". The SSM claimed that the Baptist Union "with its headquarters in Kyiv" had refused to submit to compulsory state registration locally and had "organised and conducted mass events" without rebel permission. It then went on to claim that locally the Baptists subjected church members to "psychotropic substances".

The SSM secret police also claimed that: "During an inspection of the organisation's activity, printed publications and audio-video materials were found which were directed at inciting enmity and hatred on the basis of ethnicity, origin, adherence to a social group, as well as the justification of military crimes conducted by Kyiv security people in relation to civilians in Donbas." The SSM said that unnamed experts had determined that this literature was "extremist".

The SSM website showed a letter purported to be from the regional Baptist leader Gennady Shulzhenko (who is based in the Ukrainian government-controlled part of Luhansk Region) making a number of statements, one of which states we will "cleanse the seized territories of Ukraine!" Baptists including Pastor Shulzenko insisted that the purported letter was a forgery.

Article 12 of the Religion Law says that only a court can decide to liquidate or ban a religious community. Forum 18 has been unable to find any court decision banning the Baptist Union locally.

Pastor Igor Bandura, first deputy head of Ukraine's Baptist Union, told Forum 18 that Baptists have seen no court or other legal document confirming the ban. "Our churches mostly still function," he said on 2 August 2018, "though officials have forcibly closed some, including the one in Molodogvardeisk."

On 3 June 2018, five armed men in civilian clothes and balaclavas had raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship of the Baptist Union Church in Molodogvardeisk. About 35 church members were meeting when the men – who said they were from the local SSM secret police – arrived.

The intruders stopped the meeting, demanded explanations and asked to see documents permitting the worship. They searched the premises, seizing literature and the church laptop. They ordered all those present to give their address and phone numbers and then let most of them leave.

The church's leader, Sergei Zharkov, and four church members were held and ordered to write statements. The men then sealed the premises and went to the house used by the church for alcohol and drug addicts' rehabilitation. There they also conducted a search and seized literature, medicines and a computer hard drive. They then sealed the entire building. Four residents were put on the street.

The following day, police summoned and brutally interrogated Zharkov about the community's activities, putting a bandage on his eyes and taking him to unknown places. Officers then searched his home, at the end of which they seized a hard drive from his computer, literature and his phone, along with the SIM card.

The district police officer informed Zharkov that a case was opened under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 for "holding illegal religious gatherings". Items the police seized have not been returned and the rooms remain sealed. On 1 August 2018, Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh of Krasnodon Town and District Court fined Zharkov 8,000 Russian Roubles, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

The duty police officer in Molodogvardeisk, who refused to give his name, refused to explain why police had summoned and brutally interrogated Pastor Zharkov. "The pastor knows why," the officer told Forum 18 on 1 August 2018 before putting the phone down.

The SSM secret police added in its website statement on the banning of all Baptist Union churches that: "Further measures are underway to unmask, halt and block the illegal activity of religious organisations on the territory of the LPR, including in connection with the distribution of religious printed publications of an extremist nature."

In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or face punishment. "Officials earlier didn't insist that our churches should not meet for worship," Pastor Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18. "But they have now sent a clear message that they will not tolerate such meetings for worship any more. They invited our local leaders in, and warned them not to meet," Pastor Bandura said. "In some cases they were very direct, speaking with no hesitation. Others were more indirect."

Church members fear that if they hold meetings for public worship, they will risk raids and possible arrest or other punishment. Most of the 48 Baptist Union congregations have a recognised prayer house, Pastor Bandura added. He said their Sunday worship meetings on 10 March 2019 were the last public services. "All Baptist churches that have prayer houses will halt meetings in them, so Sunday worship and other services from 17 March onwards will not take place."

Pastor Bandura said local church members think they are under surveillance and that their phone calls are listened in to. They have warned pastors in Ukrainian government controlled territory that if they try to visit the region they risk being arrested. Some local pastors have already left the region.

Stopping worship meetings "with great pain"

Adventist churches received their registration denial "with great pain", an Adventist told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv in October 2018, and this stopped both meetings for worship and their churches' "many charitable projects".

The Adventists reluctantly decided to halt all their activities to avoid "provoking unpleasantness", the Adventist added. "By and large, all our organised activity has been halted." The closure of their churches was also aimed at trying to avoid the seizure of "church property, musical instruments, and items for rituals such as baptism and the Lord's Supper".

The five Pentecostal communities which used to be linked to the Ukrainian Pentecostal Union received similar rejection letters, Union representatives told Forum 18 from Kyiv. They said other independent Pentecostal communities also had registration applications denied.

On 24 March 2019, the rebel authorities raided at least two Protestant communities as they met for Sunday worship on 24 March after the final Baptist Union services were held, Sergei Kosyak, a Protestant pastor and former resident of Donetsk, told Forum 18.

One of the known 24 March raids was on a Protestant community in the town of Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk], less than 15 kms (10 miles) from the border with Russia. About 10 officers arrived, but did not halt the service. Afterwards the

officers insisted that Pastor Nikolai Muratov accompany them to the SSM secret police. The church's deacon accompanied the pastor. There the secret police questioned them for an hour and a half. They had to sign pledges not to leave the area. The following day the police questioned Pastor Muratov.

On 27 March 2019, Pastor Muratov – who is in his seventies - was summoned to a hearing at Sverdlovsk City and District Court. However, the Judge decided not to punish him.

In April 2019, Litsoev of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry claimed to Forum 18 that all religious communities which applied for registration passed through the "expert analysis" procedure successfully and gained registration. Asked why none of the Protestant communities which lodged registration applications received it, he responded: "All that lodged applications in time."

Litsoev then said he was too busy to answer further questions and put the phone down. Forum 18 was therefore unable to ask why the rebel LPR authorities insist that individuals and communities cannot meet with others to exercise freedom of religion or belief without registration.

Small religious groups meet "until they get the first complaint from neighbours"

Raids on religious communities – particularly Protestants – meeting for worship without registration have become less frequent since 2019 but have still occurred irregularly. As noted above, after a June 2018 police raid on Sunday worship Council of Churches Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – was fined and he was fined again in June 2019.

In an example of the irregular post-2019 raids, on 28 January 2020 SSM secret police officers went to Pastor Rytikov's home, local Baptists told Forum 18. They took him to the SSM branch in Krasnodon for questioning. "They told my wife not to worry and not to tell anyone, and they promised to bring me back home in half an hour," Pastor Rytikov noted.

"You've been brought to administrative responsibility for conducting worship services without registration?" officers asked Pastor Rytikov. He responded that he had. "Are you continuing to gather?" officers asked him. He responded that they do. "Are you going to gather in future?" the SSM then asked. Pastor Rytikov said that they would.

"They then read me a warning that I am conducting extremist activity – that I incite people in sermons to extremism – and that I distribute extremist literature," Pastor Rytikov noted. "If that continues they'll bring me to criminal responsibility under Criminal Code Article 340."

LPR Criminal Code Article 340 punishes "Public calls to carry out extremist activity" with, in Part 1, fines of 100 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage or an individual's income for between one and two years, or forced labour for up to three years or imprisonment of up to four years. Part 2 punishes the same actions with use of the media, telecommunications or the internet, with forced labour of up to five years or up to five years' imprisonment.

SSM secret police officers also told Pastor Rytikov that a special commission which examined religious literature seized from him had ruled that it was "extremist".

The LPR has banned various religious texts as "extremist" (see below). This includes the Gospel of John that the SSM seized from Pastor Rytikov, which was published by Council of Churches Baptists. The confiscated Gospel is in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation originally published in 1820.

The SSM secret police in Krasnodon refused to explain their actions or discuss the case with Forum 18 on 4 February 2020. Inna Sheryayeva, who had taken over in October 2019 as head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, claimed to Forum 18 that "we're not threatening" Pastor Rytikov.

Pastor Rytikov adamantly rejects the accusations of "extremism". "Neither at worship services, nor in our literature is there anything extremist," he insisted to Forum 18. "If the Word of God – the Gospel of John indeed – is deemed an extremist book, this represents a rebellion against God himself and everything sacred!"

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

Despite no Protestant community being registered, small Protestant meetings for worship have continued unofficially. Small groups try to meet "until they get the first complaint from neighbours", a Ukrainian Protestant in Kyiv with close ties to the region told Forum 18 on 26 May 2021. These meetings take place under the threat of criminal charges for leaders and participants in meetings for worship which do not have the LPR rulers' permission.

Not applying for re-registration

Communities of Jehovah's Witnesses decided not to apply for re-registration, thinking that there was little point given the ban in neighbouring Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297). "It feels logical, since the [neighbouring rebel] Donetsk authorities have recently also banned the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2428), following the course of the Russian Federation," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 23 October 2018.

"Another reason is that the registration procedure implies the revealing of personal information on the worshippers who could easily become new targets of persecution," Jehovah's Witnesses added. They expect further raids and possible punishment in the near future.

The then deputy State Security Minister Aleksandr Basov had declared in August 2017 that the SSM secret police had halted the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses as an unregistered, "sectarian" organisation. He accused its adherents of supporting Ukraine's intelligence service and Neo-Nazis.

As noted above, due to Religion Law bans on non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches the two remaining communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate in the city of Luhansk – including its Holy Trinity Cathedral - did not initially apply for re-registration.

Two parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate were initially able to function without registration. However, in 2020 officials told the Church 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 Holy Trinity Cathedral was built in 2013 in the south-west of the city. "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 on 27 May 2021.

Holy Trinity Cathedral still functions, although "police and other officials come, check and say we must register," Bishop Afanasi told Forum 18 on 14 March 2019. "They are constantly checking us."

During one raid in April 2019, the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime searched Holy Trinity Cathedral, diocesan offices, and the homes of the diocesan secretary and another priest. Priests and other staff were interrogated, but a police officer who refused to give his full name insisted to Forum 18 that the two priests present are "at liberty" and are free to continue to conduct meetings for worship.

Andrei Litsoev, then-head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, blamed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate itself for its problems. "They're guilty," he insisted to Forum 18 in April 2019. "It is not registered, so it doesn't exist".

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate applied for registration for Holy Trinity Cathedral in 2019. Officials refused to consider the application as the documents including the Church's charter were in Ukrainian not Russian. Up until February 2022 meetings for worship are still allowed within the Cathedral. However, the LPR rebels demand that the Ukrainian-language should not be used for any part of services, including sermons.

As is their right under international human rights law (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>), all Council of Churches Baptist congregations (who are not part of Baptist Unions) in all territories they operate in refuse to apply for state permission to exist, as they think that state permission to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief leads to state interference. They point out that the LPR Religion Law specifies in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

"We don't have closed communities. Everything here is good."

As of December 2019, the LPR authorities had registered only 195 religious organisations, according to figures given by Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Dmitry Sidorov at a 26 December 2019 briefing. Of the 195 religious organisations, 188 were of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), four were Muslim, and one each were Old Believer, Jewish and Catholic, Sidorov noted.

This is a reduction from figures claimed in September 2019 by the Justice Ministry. It claimed on its website then that 36 non-Moscow Patriarchate religious communities were registered: Baptists - 24; Seventh-day Adventists - 4; Pentecostals - 3; Muslims - 2; Jews - 1; Greek Catholics - 1; Hare Krishna devotees - 1.

Official claims are unreliable. As noted above, all Baptist Union churches were banned by the SSM secret police, Baptist Council of Churches communities do not seek registration, and all Adventist and Pentecostal communities were refused registration.

The Justice Ministry refused to answer any questions about the registration of religious communities. The Registration of

Non-Commercial Organisations referred all enquiries to the Culture Ministry. "This is no longer the responsibility of the Justice Ministry," the official – who did not give her name – told Forum 18 on 28 September 2021.

Inna Sheryayeva, who in October 2019 took over from Andrei Litsoev as head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, refused to tell Forum 18 if any other religious communities had gained registration since December 2019 or why applications from many communities – including all Protestant communities - have been refused.

Officials of the Registration Department of the Justice Ministry – which is supposed to register religious communities – have repeatedly refused absolutely to say which communities have been allowed to register and which have been refused, or give any overall statistics.

Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Sidorov claimed at the 26 December 2019 briefing that a "further range of organisations which have undergone the religious studies expert analysis are now in the stage of state registration with the LPR Justice Ministry".

Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department head Sheryayeva refused to explain why police raid religious communities, courts punish individuals for exercising freedom of religion or belief, why Protestant churches are all closed, and why clergy cannot live permanently or visit the region. "We don't have closed communities," she claimed to Forum 18. "Everything here is good. We have received no complaints."

No registration – no gas, electricity, or water

Religious communities which had their own place of worship, but which failed to gain LPR registration, had their gas cut off in 2019, Baptist Pastor Serhii Moroz, who is from Luhansk but now lives in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020. In late 2019 came the threat that electricity and water too would be cut off.

"Officials argue that they cannot supply gas, electricity and water to organisations that don't officially exist, as they can't have contracts with them," Pastor Moroz told Forum 18.

Communities which met in church members' homes have not had gas, electricity and water supplies cut, Pastor Moroz added.

Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department head Sheryayeva claimed to Forum 18 she had not heard that gas, electricity, and water supplies to unregistered places of worship have been cut off, or are threatened with being cut off.

Without registration, or LPR rebel permission to exist, religious communities do not have legal personality and cannot sign contracts. So no place of worship owned by unregistered communities such as Protestants has received gas, water or electricity since 2020, a local Protestant told Forum 18 from Kyiv on 23 February 2022.

Also, no unregistered religious communities have any access to buildings – such as churches - which they own.

Isolation

Many communities complain about the isolation they are now under. Contacts with fellow believers elsewhere in Ukraine are difficult and most communities cannot invite those they would like to invite for religious purposes, such as to lead worship meetings or conduct education. Individuals can bring in only small quantities of religious literature.

This enforced isolation affects many other communities in addition to the Catholics, whose Bishop, Stepan Meniuk, Greek Catholic priest Fr Mykhailo and Roman Catholic priest Fr Rapa are denied entry or denied permission to live there permanently to minister to their communities (see below).

Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk (who was based in the Ukrainian-controlled part of Luhansk Region until his transfer to a different diocese in 2021) was not allowed to enter rebel-held territory in Luhansk. "I tried in June 2019, but they didn't let me in," he told Forum 18. "Other priests of ours can't go in either." At the same time, the two priests of that Church based in Luhansk were not allowed to leave rebel-held territory, though the ban for both was later lifted (see above).

Lack of contact with the rest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kyiv Patriarchate in government-controlled Ukraine also means that the Church in Luhansk has to survive on the meagre donations from impoverished parishioners.

As all Protestant communities are regarded as illegal, they are unable to invite leaders or teachers from outside. "Our pastors are hungry for fellowship," a Protestant from elsewhere in Ukraine who maintains contacts with local Protestant leaders told Forum 18 in October 2019. "They feel very isolated."

No permanent priest, and no nuns, for Roman Catholics

The two Roman Catholic parishes - in Luhansk and nearby Stakhanov - are served by one priest. The Greek Catholic parish in Luhansk is similarly served by one priest. However, the LPR authorities have obstructed the two priests (one Roman Catholic and one Greek Catholic) as well as nuns from living in the area to minister to their parishes.

Catholic nuns who used to work in the Luhansk parish left amid the conflict in 2014 and have not been allowed to return. "The people want them to work there again. We want them to," one Catholic who wished to remain anonymous for fear of rebel reprisals told Forum 18.

Fr Grzegorz Rapa – a Polish priest who has served the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish since 1993 – was barred in 2019 from living there permanently. The Parish gained LPR registration in September 2020. "He can stay there for three months, then has to be out for three months," Jan Sobilo, auxiliary Bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia, told Forum 18 on 14 October 2019.

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. They claimed he did not have permanent residence – even though he lived in Luhansk from 1993 long before the LPR was proclaimed in 2014.

The Greek Catholic priest from neighbouring Donetsk Fr Mikhaylo Zaverchuk – who serves in both the Byzantine and Latin rites – celebrated Easter Mass in the Catholic Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Luhansk on 12 April 2020. The journey from Donetsk to Luhansk takes about three and a half hours by road. However, as relations between the rebel leaderships of Donetsk and Luhansk worsened in 2020 and coronavirus infections spread, the border was closed and Fr Zaverchuk was unable to visit Luhansk again.

The border between the DPR and LPR reopened on 18 June 2021, allowing the Donetsk-based Greek Catholic priest Fr Zaverchuk to make the long journey to Luhansk again. The only Masses held in 2021 were the ones he celebrated on Sunday 28 November in Luhansk, on Sunday 5 December in Stakhanov, Christmas vigil Mass in Stakhanov on 24 December, and Mass in Luhansk on 25 December. These were the first Christmas services in either parish since Christmas 2019.

When Fr Zaverchuk 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.

From 2020 until February 2022, Roman Catholics in Luhansk and Stakhanov have gathered on Sundays for prayer services led by laypeople or for online Masses, including by Fr Rapa. "They have to set up a screen on the altar and a projector," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. "It is like in Soviet times," he commented, recalling that a radio was in Soviet times often put on the altar of a church with no priest to broadcast Mass to the congregation.

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.

Why can't Roman Catholic priest return?

The LPR authorities have given conflicting reasons as to why Fr Rapa cannot return to the two parishes in the territory they control. In early 2020, the border between the LPR and Ukrainian-controlled Ukraine was closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Even when the border reopened in November 2020, Fr Rapa was still refused permission to return. That month, LPR authorities refused him entry at the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point, as they also did in early April 2021, ahead of Easter.

On 17 March 2021, Luhansk Catholics 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.

"Catholics in Luhansk are a registered religious community and no one obstructs their activity," Sergei Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the unrecognised LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry claimed to Forum 18 on 21 December 2021. Asked why the two parishes have not been allowed a resident priest since March 2020, he said he was "not informed". "Our department doesn't take such a decision – it is decided at a higher level."

Officials at the entity's Foreign Ministry told Forum 18 on 21 December 2021 that Soroka was off work, while Belov was not in the

office.

"The Bishop is unable to send anyone as none of the priests have permanent (or temporary) residence in Luhansk," Fr Rapa told Forum 18 on 11 December 2021. "Only those with such permanent residence are able to enter Luhansk." He said he aimed to try again in 2022 to get permission to return to his parish. "Hopes are small that they will let me in, but I will struggle to the last."

Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo has been denied entry to LPR-controlled territory since he visited with the Vatican nuncio at Christmas 2019. "I have not tried again to visit recently," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. "There's no point as they wouldn't let me in." He said he would be praying for officials in Luhansk that they could work peacefully for the common good in 2022 and that he would once more be allowed to visit.

Censorship

As noted above, various religious texts have been banned by the LPR as "extremist". This includes the Gospel of John published by Council of Churches Baptists. The Russian Synodal translation was originally published in 1820, and is widely used by other Christian Churches in the Russian-speaking world, including the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate and many Protestant Churches.

It was banned as "extremist" in a 26 November 2019 LPR rebel government decision banning 12 books published by the Khristianin publishing house run by the Council of Churches. The other banned books include the main Council of Churches Baptist hymnbook "Songs of Revival", their regular magazine "Herald of Truth", and children's books.

The LPR Justice Ministry then added the books to the State List of Extremist Materials, which it published on its website on 10 December 2019. The List then had 13 entries, the only other book being a collection of songs by a Chechen composer.

The 26 November 2019 LPR government decision has not been published. An official of the government department handling citizens' calls – who refused to give her name - told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 20 December that the decision is a "secret document for official use and for limited distribution". She refused to comment on the content, referring all questions to the Justice Ministry.

Yelena Tsvetkova, the head of the Registration Department at the Justice Ministry, said that the government banning decision is not public. She insisted to Forum 18 from Luhansk on 20 December 2019 that all is in accordance with the law. She cited the February 2018 LPR Law on Countering Extremist Activity, which established the List.

The 2018 Law defines "extremist materials" as those calling for or justifying "extremist activity", including the works of leaders of the German Nazi party and the Italian fascist party, espousing ethnic or racial superiority, or justifying war crimes aiming to destroy all or part of an ethnic, social, racial or religious group.

Tsvetkova of the Justice Ministry was unable to say in which category officials have placed the 12 Baptist books. She declined to discuss why the Gospel of John – as part of the Christian Bible read in all Christian worship meetings and privately – was banned as "extremist". Tsvetkova was also unable to say who had initiated the ban.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, denied that the LPR had banned 12 Baptist books, including the Gospel of John. Told that the list is on the Justice Ministry website, she told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020: "Anything can be put on a website. In any case, it is a different Ministry."

The LPR rebels have continued to ban texts and add books to their State List of Extremist Materials. 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 2021 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 claimed 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 Gubaydulín on 26 July 2021, but he put the phone down immediately after questions were asked. No subsequent calls were answered.

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 2021.

"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 2021 that it had received no instructions related to the case.

Natalya Zaitseva 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 2021.

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.

Following the May 2021 court decision in Sverdlovsk, the Justice Ministry added the newly banned books to its State List of Extremist Materials. The updated list, dated 2 July 2021 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 six Jehovah's Witness materials include their New World version of the Bible, the magazines "Awake!" and "The Watchtower", their website jw.org, and the JW Library mobile app. The LPR Council of Ministers banned them in a July 2018 decision, which also banned a Ukrainian Baptist Union magazine and another Christian book.

No decisions ruling that these 24 religious books and materials are "extremist" have been published. Forum 18 tried to get copies of these court rulings in June 2021, but a Justice Ministry official told Forum 18 she did not have them. Another official handling publication of official texts told Forum 18: "If decisions are authorised for publication they are published on the website. If they are not authorised for publication, they will not be published."

What will happen to people with banned books?

Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials in Luhansk what will happen to individuals or communities found to be in possession of any of the 12 banned Christian books. "Ask the security agencies," Yelena Tsvetkova of the Justice Ministry told Forum 18. "Our job is only to manage the List."

The duty officer at the SSM secret police in Luhansk said that the Acting State Security Minister, Anatoly Antonov, was not in the office. The duty officer – who refused to give his name – told Forum 18 on 20 December 2019 that "it is difficult to say what will happen" to those found in possession of any of these books. The duty officer added that he could not say which department of the Ministry handles "extremism" issues. "You're asking too many questions," he added, and then put the phone down.

Officials at the Interior Ministry in Luhansk (which controls the police) referred Forum 18 to Aleksei Melnik, the head of the office of Interior Minister Igor Kornet. "Anyone who spreads extremist literature will be dealt with in accordance with the law," Melnik told Forum 18 on 20 December 2019. "There is the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code."

Melnik refused to explain if anyone who possesses the Gospel of John in the Synodal translation will face prosecution or not. He then put the phone down.

Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 19 December 2019 that officials had told them of the ban on 12 of their publications, but had not told them what would happen to them if they are found to be in possession of any of them.

The future?

Throughout the LPR entity's existence since 2014, its rulers have seriously and repeatedly violated human rights, including the interlinked freedoms of religion and belief, of association, and of expression. There is no current evidence that this record will improve, or that the LPR's rulers will cease to try to intimidate the people they control into silence about human rights violations they experience.

The current Russian government is the LPR rebels' only international backer, and as a serious human rights violator itself is unlikely to facilitate any reduction in human rights violations within rebel-held areas of Ukraine. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Donbas
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=87>)

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