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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Religious leaders seized, tortured; churches, mosques closed; no news of seized Baptist couple

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

Following Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian and Russian-backed officials and soldiers have in newly-occupied areas seized and tortured religious leaders, searched and sealed places of worship to prevent their use for worship, confiscated equipment and literature, and demanded documents. On 21 September masked Russian soldiers seized Mariupol Baptist pastor Leonid Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana, and the occupation authorities are still refusing to tell local Baptists what has happened to them. [UPDATE: Ponomaryovs freed 21 October.]

Following Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian and Russian-backed officials and soldiers have in newly-occupied areas seized and tortured religious leaders, searched and sealed places of worship to prevent their use for worship, confiscated equipment and literature, demanded documents, and in at least one case forcibly expelled church members from their building.

The war that followed Russia's renewed 2022 invasion of Ukraine has seen many places of worship destroyed or damaged. Russian forces have also seized many religious leaders of a variety of religious communities. In most of these cases, however, it remains unclear if places of worship or religious leaders were targeted to specifically punish the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief (see below).

Mariupol was occupied by Russian troops and forces of the Russian-controlled Donetsk People's Republic in May 2022. In June, Russian officials or soldiers visited two churches in Donetsk Region, Central Baptist Church and the Church of Christ the Saviour in Mariupol, and forcibly expelled Protestants from their church and rehabilitation centre in the nearby village of Manhush (see below).

On 18 October, two officers from the DPR State Security Ministry in Donetsk and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, came to the Mariupol home of Sergey Pantyukhov. He is a leader of one of the Council of Baptist congregations in the city. The two officers interrogated him about the ownership of the congregation's church building, local Baptists stated. Church members asked for prayers that the church building will not be confiscated and that another Mariupol Council of Churches Baptist pastor Leonid Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana will be found (see below).

On 23 June, the Russian military brought a delegation of Moscow Patriarchate priests to Mariupol. There they toured churches, including the Church of Petro Mohyla of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019. "After the visit of the Moscow FSB agents in cassocks, it became known that the whole large library, collected by volunteers and benefactors, was seized and burned in the yard," stated Petro Andriushchenko, advisor to the (Ukrainian) Mayor of Mariupol who had to flee the city (see below).

On 21 September masked Russian soldiers came to the home of Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in the newly-occupied city of Mariupol, and his wife Tatyana. Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov's neighbours "distinctly heard groans and cries" as the masked men took Leonid and Tatyana away "in an unknown direction", local Baptists said. The Ponomaryovs were initially taken to a police station, and despite Baptists' attempts to find out where they currently are the occupation authorities have not given any information (see below).

The DPR State Security Ministry, the Russian-controlled police, the DPR Interior Ministry, and the DPR Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office have all refused to give Forum 18 any information about what has happened to Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov (see below).

[UPDATE 21 October 2022: Tatyana and Leonid Ponomaryov were freed on 21 October and reunited with relatives and church members.]

Russian and Russian-backed forces occupied the city of Lysychansk in Ukraine's Luhansk Region in early July. Within days they seized the Central Baptist church, the largest Protestant church in the city. Men in military dress – who did not identify themselves –

broke down the door to gain entry. "They threw out all our possessions, including all our Christian literature, including Bibles and educational materials," the Church's Pastor Eduard Nosachov stated. Several of the remaining church members gradually took the Bibles that had been thrown into a side room or into the yard and hid them in safe places, despite the danger. The Baptist Church is now being used by the Russian-controlled city administration. LPR authorities used the church in late September to hold the referendum on joining Russia (see below).

Pastor Nosachov, who left in April, noted that local churches had given aid to local residents before the war, "but when the Russians came, residents immediately reported on the church members and showed the authorities where Christians lived". "Russian officials told local church members in Lysychansk that the military administration has banned all Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists as extremists," Pastor Nosachov noted (see below).

On about 14 June, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided a Baptist church in Vasilivka and recorded the details of all those present, a leader of Ukraine's Baptist Union told Forum 18. The officers told them that they were closing the church as a "destructive sect" and no further meetings would be allowed. They seized the keys to the building. The duty officer at the Russian-controlled police insisted to Forum 18 that "churches are open". He put the phone down when Forum 18 asked why Russian FSB officers closed the Baptist church in the town and the Russian military detained the pastor (see below),

Rustem Asanov, a Crimean Tatar, was Imam of the Muslim Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in the village of Shchastlivtse in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region. He was in Henichesk District at the time of the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, and was detained and tortured in a basement by Russian occupation forces. After he was released, Russian occupation forces came to inspect the Mosque's contents. "With them was a Muslim apparently from the [Russian] North Caucasus, possibly from Dagestan and possibly working for them," Asanov told Forum 18. "He was obviously responsible for Muslims. He looked through all the books and confiscated those that he deemed 'not correct'. He had no list of literature with him, and was obviously identifying books [to confiscate] from memory." Asanov estimates that the unidentified man took about one third of the mosque's books. The Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in Shchastlivtse remains closed (see below).

Russian military and other occupation officials have demanded that religious communities and leaders affiliate with Russian instead of Ukrainian religious entities. While Imam Asanov was being held and tortured in March by Russian forces, one man in civilian clothes insisted that he co-operate with the occupation authorities. The man would not give his name, but gave his call sign as "Bars" (Leopard). Imam Asanov suspects from "Bars" manner that he was from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). "Bars" also insisted that Imam Asanov cut the community's ties to the Spiritual Administration in Kyiv and subjugate his mosque community to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea in the occupied Ukrainian city of Simferopol (see below).

"Bars" also told Asanov that in time, all religious communities in Russian-occupied territory would be required to re-register with Russia's Justice Ministry under Russian law, Asanov told Forum 18. "Ukraine won't exist," "Bars" told him. Imam Asanov fled from Russian-occupied territory to Ukrainian government-held territory in late March (see below).

On 10 June, the Luhansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC) held a Diocesan Council, which voted to reject the 27 May changes agreed by the UOC Synod in Kyiv to distance the Church from the Moscow Patriarchate. The Luhansk Diocese decided to stop commemorating in the liturgy Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky), the UOC head, and to ask Patriarch Kirill to take the Diocese under his direct jurisdiction. "They put pressure on Metropolitan Panteleimon [Povoroznyuk] for a long time," Archimandrite Feognost Pushkov, a UOC priest in Luhansk Region, noted, citing a cleric and a layperson from Luhansk. "He didn't make up his mind until the last minute. He faced pressure not just from the LPR authorities, but from its zealous supporters among the local 'influencers' in cassocks!" (see below).

Illegal occupation and annexation

Following Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian and Russian-backed officials and soldiers have in newly-occupied areas seized and tortured religious leaders, searched and sealed places of worship to prevent their use for worship, confiscated equipment, demanded documents, and in at least one case forcibly expelled church members from their building.

Russia illegally annexed Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions, as well as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on 5 October, following referenda that were widely denounced by the international community.

"The so-called 'referenda' in Ukraine were conducted in areas under Russian occupation," United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said on Twitter on 29 September. "They can't be called a genuine expression of the popular will."

Russia illegally annexed the DPR and LPR as Russian federal subjects on 5 October, retaining the DPR and LPR names.

As of mid-October, Russia occupies about 80 percent of Ukraine's Kherson Region and about 70 percent of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. (The city of Zaporizhzhia remains under Ukrainian government control.) The DPR occupies about 60 percent of Ukraine's Donetsk Region, while the LPR occupies about 95 percent of Ukraine's Luhansk Region.

On 19 October Russia imposed martial law (<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-drone-attacks/32090900.html>) on the parts of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia which it has illegally occupied and annexed. Russia's 2002 Law on Martial Law grants the Russian president the power in areas under martial law to "halt the activity of political parties, public organisations and religious associations conducting propaganda and/or agitation as well as other subversive activity".

War damage or targeted attacks on freedom of religion or belief?

The war that followed Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has seen many places of worship destroyed or damaged. At least 270 places of worship, religious educational institutions, and sacred sites (such as cemeteries or memorials) were either completely destroyed or damaged between 24 February and 15 July, the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom calculated (<https://irf.in.ua/files/publications/2022.09-IRF-Ukraine-report-ENG.pdf>).

Russian forces have also seized many religious leaders of a variety of religious communities. In most of these cases, however, it remains unclear if places of worship or religious leaders were targeted to specifically punish the exercise of the freedom of religion or belief.

Russian or Russian-backed forces have questioned individuals they have detained about their religious communities if they find out that they are active members of such a community. It remains unclear whether this is because they are targeting such communities, or whether they are seeking general information about the population.

Repression extended to newly-occupied territories

Pro-Russian rebels occupied parts of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk Regions in April 2014 and proclaimed what they called the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Heavy fighting ensued. Until the February 2022 renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian-controlled rebel administrations controlled about half of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Russia illegally annexed the DPR and LPR as Russian federal subjects on 5 October, retaining the DPR and LPR names.

Freedom of religion and belief is with other human rights also severely restricted within the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, which Russia illegally occupied and annexed (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>) in 2014. Freedom of religion and belief violations in Russian-occupied Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774) include: forced imposition of Russian laws and restrictions on exercising human rights, including freedom of religion or belief; jailing Muslim and Jehovah's Witness Crimean prisoners of conscience; forcible closure of places of worship; and fining people for leading meetings for worship without Russian state permission.

Since 2014, the internationally unrecognised authorities of the Luhansk People's Republic (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) and the Donetsk People's Republic (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>) have also imposed severe restrictions on all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and other human rights.

Following Russia's renewed 2022 invasion of Ukraine, restrictions on the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights were extended to the newly-occupied parts of the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic, as well as other Ukrainian territory Russia has occupied. On 19 October Russia imposed martial law (<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-drone-attacks/32090900.html>) on the parts of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia which it has illegally occupied and annexed.

Donetsk Region: Searches, threats, expulsion from church

Mariupol, in Ukraine's Donetsk Region, was the location of bitter fighting following Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, which was launched in February 2022. The city was occupied by Russian troops and forces of the Russian-controlled Donetsk People's Republic (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>) in May 2022.

In mid-June, Russian officials or soldiers visited three churches in Donetsk Region - Central Baptist Church in Mariupol, the Church of Christ the Saviour in Mariupol, and a church in Manhush. The Russian officials and soldiers conducted searches, confiscated equipment, demanded documents, and in one case forcibly drove out church members from their building.

On Sunday 12 June, armed men came to Mariupol's Central Baptist Church, where nearly 100 church members were meeting for worship. The armed men issued threats and demanded the church's registration documents. Church members handed over the original documents, which the armed men took with them.

On 15 or 16 June, officials came to a pastor of Mariupol's Christ the Saviour Baptist Church, and asked to see the church's registration documents. The minister told the officials that the leader of the church had the documentation but was not presently in the city. The officials then told him to come to their office to discuss the church registration. He visited, and the officials have told

him they have no further questions.

Also on 15 or 16 June, Russian military personnel forcibly expelled Protestants from their church and rehabilitation centre in the village of Manhush, about 30 kilometres (20 miles) from Mariupol.

On 18 October two officers, from the DPR State Security Ministry in Donetsk and the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, came to the Mariupol home of Sergey Pantyukhov. He is a leader of one of the Council of Baptist congregations in the city. The two officers interrogated him about the ownership of the congregation's church building, local Baptists stated.

Church members asked for prayers that the church building will not be confiscated, as well as that another Mariupol Council of Churches Baptist pastor Leonid Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana will be found (see below).

On 20 October, the duty officer at Mariupol City Police referred all enquiries to the DPR Interior Ministry in Donetsk. The people who answered the phones at the listed numbers for the Interior Ministry chancellery and the press service insisted to Forum 18 the same day that they were residential numbers.

Donetsk Region: "Extremist" books on religion purged from libraries

On 30 May, the Russian-backed head of the DPR, Denis Pushilin, signed a Decree bringing the DPR's "Republican List of Extremist Materials" into line with Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials. The Russian Federal List includes a number of religious works, including books by the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi and many Jehovah's Witness publications.

The DPR's list included three Muslim booklets published by the Donbas Muftiate, banned in July 2016 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2428), as well as 12 Jehovah's Witness books and websites banned in 2017 and 2018 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2428), including its main international website. The DPR's list, last updated to include court bans in October 2020, remains accessible on the DPR Justice Ministry website. It remains unclear if the materials it lists as "extremist" remain banned locally if they are not also on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On 21 May, the DPR's Culture Ministry began a programme of removing from public libraries literature that it regards as "extremist". Viktoriya Kamynina, chief specialist in the Culture Ministry's Religion and Nationalities Department, told a briefing in Donetsk on 25 May that specialists from the Krupskaya Donetsk Republic Universal Scientific Library were travelling to newly-seized towns and villages to remove such literature from libraries.

Kamynina said about 2,000 "extremist" publications had already been removed. These included not only books on Ukrainian culture and history and books about Adolf Hitler, but books on "political and religious figures".

Forum 18 asked both the Culture Ministry and the Krupskaya Library in writing on 17 October what religious books had been removed from libraries and who determined whether any particular book on religion was "extremist" or not. Forum 18 received no response from either by the end of the working day in Donetsk of 20 October.

Mariupol, Donetsk Region: Book-burning

On 23 June, the Russian military brought a delegation of Moscow Patriarchate priests to Mariupol. There they toured churches, including the Church of Petro Mohyla of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019.

"After the visit of the Moscow FSB agents in cassocks, it became known that the whole large library, collected by volunteers and benefactors, was seized and burned in the yard .. with the advice and assistance of the priests of the Russian Orthodox Church," Petro Andriushchenko, advisor to the (Ukrainian) Mayor of Mariupol who had to flee the city, announced on his Telegram channel on 25 June. "The library contained several unique copies of Ukrainian-language publications, which are now lost forever."

Andriushchenko added that the Church of Petro Mohyla, "built with the support of the townspeople", was now threatened. "Now the occupiers are deciding the issue of its demolition or remodelling in accordance with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church."

Mariupol, Donetsk Region: No news of seized pastor and wife

Ahead of the illegal 23 September Russian referenda, on 21 September masked Russian or DPR soldiers came to the home of Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in the newly-occupied city of Mariupol, and his wife Tatyana. Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov's neighbours "distinctly heard groans and cries" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779) as the masked men took the couple away "in an unknown direction", local Baptists said.

The Ponomaryovs were initially taken to a police station and told that they would be held until the Russian-controlled referendum on the status of Donetsk Region was over. However, they were not released when the referendum concluded on 27 September.

Russian officials had initially claimed the couple had been involved in alleged "extremist activity" and searched the Baptist Church, seizing religious literature. The Russian officials then sealed the church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779) to prevent future meetings for worship being held.

The duty officer at the DPR State Security Ministry – who did not give his name – referred all enquiries to the police. "For kidnappings, if that is the case, you should go to the police," (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779) he told Forum 18 on 6 October. The police officer repeated this when Forum 18 told him that armed and masked men in army uniform took the couple.

The duty officer at the Russian-controlled police of Mariupol's Kalmiushy (Ilichivsky) District, where the Ponomaryovs live, refused to answer any questions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779). "We can't give any information by phone," she told Forum 18 on 6 October. She refused to put Forum 18 through to or give a phone number for Pavel Sotnikov, the District police chief.

On 20 October, the duty officer at Mariupol City Police referred all enquiries to the DPR Interior Ministry in Donetsk. The people who answered the phones at the listed numbers for the Interior Ministry chancellery and the press service insisted to Forum 18 the same day that they were residential numbers.

Following earlier Baptist Council of Churches attempts to find out what happened to Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779), the Council of Churches sent a delegation of leaders to Donetsk. They hoped to meet acting DPR head Denis Pushilin (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2689) to try to find out what has happened to the couple.

"Today, a group of our brother pastors were at the reception office of the head of the DPR," local Christians stated on 11 October. The Baptist delegation handed over a message from the intercession department of the International Council of Churches. Officials "received this message, registered it, and said that this is not for the first time they have heard this surname".

The Missing Persons Department of the DPR Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Donetsk on 6 October refused to give Forum 18 any information about what it might be doing to find out what has happened to Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov.

Forum 18 then asked the DPR's Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova in writing on 6 October about the Ponomaryovs. The 14 October written response, signed by the head of administration Varvara Bazarova, stated that Forum 18 was not eligible to lodge an enquiry because it is not an individual who has lodged a complaint or a representative of one.

[UPDATE 21 October 2022: Tatyana and Leonid Ponomaryov were freed on 21 October and reunited with relatives and church members.]

Luhansk Region: Lysychansk church seizures

Russian and Russian-backed forces occupied the city of Lysychansk in Ukraine's Luhansk Region in early July. Within days they seized the Central Baptist church, the largest Protestant church in the city, adapting it for their use.

Men in military dress – who did not identify themselves – broke down the door to gain entry, the Church's Pastor Eduard Nosachov – who had fled the town to Ukrainian government-held territory in April because of the fighting – told Forum 18 on 20 October. They placed Russian and LPR flags on the front and planned to pull down the cross from the steeple.

"They threw out all our possessions, including all our Christian literature, including Bibles and educational materials," Pastor Nosachov added. Several of the remaining church members gradually took the Bibles that had been thrown into a side room or into the yard and hid them in safe places, despite the danger.

The Baptist Church is now being used by the Russian-controlled city administration. LPR authorities used the church in late September to hold the referendum on joining Russia.

When Pastor Nosachov left in April, he took with him the documents for the Church. The community is nearly 30 years old and "we built the church from nothing", he told Forum 18. He noted that local churches had given aid to local residents before the war, "but when the Russians came, residents immediately reported on the church members and showed the authorities where Christians lived".

In late July, the Russian forces seized Grace Baptist church in a residential district of Lysychansk – originally established by Pastor Nosachov's congregation. Russian officials claimed it would be used as a kindergarten, Pastor Nosachov told Forum 18.

"Russian officials told local church members in Lysychansk that the military administration has banned all Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists as extremists," Pastor Nosachov noted. "We have heard about this but not seen any written order." He pointed out that Protestant congregations have been banned in the LPR for some years.

Russian freedom of religion or belief restrictions for Zaporizhzhia, Kherson Regions?

Russia illegally annexed Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions on 5 October, following illegal referenda that were widely denounced by the international community. As of mid-October, Russia occupies about 80 percent of Ukraine's Kherson Region and about 70 percent of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. (The city of Zaporizhzhia remains under Ukrainian government control.)

Ever since the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and occupation of large parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions, the Russian occupation forces have sought to control all aspects of life in the two Regions. They established Military/Civilian Administrations in the two Regions and regional branches of ministries in July.

The Russian government established what it called temporary regional departments of Russia's Interior Ministry in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions on 28 July. These temporary departments repeatedly stressed on their social media accounts that "criminals" would be punished under Russia's Criminal Code.

However, the Russian occupation administrations do not appear to have set out any policy on for imposing Russian restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion and belief (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=10>). They appear to have made no statements, for example, banning religious communities that are banned in Russia (such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims who study the works of the theologian Said Nursi), or imposing Russian punishments for exercising freedom of religion or belief. They do not appear to have established systems to register religious communities under Russian law.

Schools in both Regions adopted Russian school curricula, with education in Russian and often using teachers brought in from Russia. The Russian Military/Civilian Administration of Kherson Region announced that from 1 September, the start of the new school year, schools would teach a course identified as Foundations of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Education and Science Ministry in Kherson on 20 October to find out the content of the school course.

On 13 October, the Russian-installed head of Kherson Region administration, Sergey Yeliseyev, declared on Telegram that in Kherson Region, "from the moment of joining the Russian Federation", Russian law has been in force. "Therefore, all crimes and offences will be punished in accordance with the Criminal and Administrative Codes of the Russian Federation."

Zaporizhzhia Region: Protestant churches raided, closed, seized

On about 14 June, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided a Baptist church in Vasilivka in Zaporizhzhia Region and recorded the details of all those present, a leader of Ukraine's Baptist Union told Forum 18. The officers told them that they were closing the church as a "destructive sect" and no further meetings would be allowed. They seized the keys to the building.

Then officers went to the home of the pastor, Mykola Zholovan, carried out a search, and took away laptops and phones for checking. They put him under house arrest. On 25 June, the Russian military detained Pastor Zholovan. They released him only on 27 June. He fled the area for Ukrainian government-controlled territory soon afterwards.

The duty officer at Vasilivka (Russian) Police, who did not give his name, insisted to Forum 18 on 18 October that "churches are open". Asked why Russian FSB officers closed the Baptist church in the town and the Russian military detained the pastor, he put the phone down.

Also on 18 June, the Russian military detained Valentin Zhuravlev, a pastor of the Melitopol Source of Life Protestant Church who is also a local veterinary surgeon, while he was participating in a non-political interfaith public prayer event in the city square, according to eyewitnesses. He also has reportedly been released.

At the beginning of August, the Russian military seized the building of Melitopol Christian Church, which is led by Pastor Viktor Sergeyev, banning all further worship services, the vsirazom.ua news website noted on 13 September. The military turned the church building – a large structure with palm trees and fountains - into a cultural, entertainment and sports complex.

On 4 August, the Russian-installed head of the nearby village of Kirillovka, Yekaterina Umanets, posted pictures of herself on her Telegram channel outside the seized Melitopol Christian Church, which had a large Russian flag draped over the front. "Greetings from the Youth and Sports Ministry," she wrote. "The sect in which the covens meeting against the RF [Russian Federation] began to serve for the benefit of the RF."

The Russian military seized Word of Life Pentecostal Church in the centre of Melitopol and began using it as a military base, local

news agency RIA Melitopol noted on Telegram on 30 August. Soldiers hung a camouflage net on the fence around the building.

On 11 September, the Russian military raided the Protestant Grace Church in Melitopol during the Sunday morning meeting for worship, the church noted on its website. Church members were singing a worship song in Ukrainian as soldiers mounted the stage to halt the service, as seen on the Church's livestream. Soldiers recorded the names and passport details of all those present. They forced the women and children out of the church building and then photographed and fingerprinted all the men, taking their identity documents, the inform.zp.ua news agency noted the same day.

Russian soldiers accused Grace Church members of having links with the United States, declared the church "nationalised", and told them not to come there in future. Soldiers detained two of the church's pastors, including chief pastor Mikhail Britsin.

On 21 September, Russian military personnel came to the Baptist church in the village of Chkalovo in Melitopol District and banned it from meeting, the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18. "After the referendum, you will no longer be here, we have only one faith – the Orthodox," a church member quoted a soldier as telling the community.

Before the Russian invasion of the area in February, the Chkalovo church had more than 100 members. About half remain, and have held meetings for worship there each day since the invasion began.

The telephone at the (Russian) Melitopol District Military/Civilian Administration was not answered each time Forum 18 called between 18 and 20 October.

On 18 October, the military commandant of the town of Chernihivka in Berdyansk District took the keys of the Baptist Church and said that from now on the building is the property of the "administration", Ukraine's Baptist Union announced the following day. Officials ordered the church community to hand over the documents for the church building within three days. On 19 October, the Baptist Union cited church members as declaring that "the keys to the church have been returned and they have for the moment allowed the holding of services after the documents (ownership of the property, [church] statute) were presented to the military commander's office".

The telephone at the (Russian) Berdyansk District Police was not answered or was busy each time Forum 18 called on 20 October.

Kherson Region: Imam seized, tortured, books confiscated, mosque closed

Rustem Asanov, a Crimean Tatar, was Imam of the Muslim Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region. Shchastlivtseve is on a spit of land off the eastern coast of Russian-occupied Crimea, although was not itself occupied until the 2022 renewed Russian invasion. The Birlik community was part of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea, which re-established itself in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv in 2016 following the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>).

Freedom of religion and belief violations in Russian-occupied Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774) include: forced imposition of Russian laws and restrictions on exercising human rights, including freedom of religion or belief; jailing Muslim and Jehovah's Witness Crimean prisoners of conscience; forcible closure of places of worship; and fining people for leading meetings for worship without Russian state permission.

Imam Asanov was in Henichesk District at the time of the renewed Russian renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and was detained and tortured in a basement by Russian occupation forces for one day in early March, he told the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom in a video interview published on 22 September. The Russian forces detained him because he was taking part in a demonstration, but when they discovered he led a local religious community they began focusing on that, he told Forum 18 on 11 October. The soldiers stressed to him that "I, as a religious figure, set the wrong example for my community. It annoyed them."

The day after Imam Asanov's release in early March, Russian military forces came to the Birlik Mosque while he was there. The Russian occupation forces came to inspect the Mosque's contents, particularly focusing on the literature it had. "With them was a Muslim apparently from the [Russian] North Caucasus, possibly from Dagestan and possibly working for them," Asanov told Forum 18 on 11 October. "He was obviously responsible for Muslims. He looked through all the books and confiscated those that he deemed 'not correct'. He had no list of literature with him, and was obviously identifying books [to confiscate] from memory."

Asanov estimates that the unidentified man took about one third of the mosque's books. These included the prayer collection "Fortress of a Muslim" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2403), and an interpretation of the Koran by the Saudi theologian Abdul-Rahman al-Sa'di, both of them banned by Russian courts in Russia and on the Russian Federal List of Extremist Materials.

"The occupation administration provided local imams with lists of recommended literature that can be used, as well as lists of prohibited religious literature," Asanov told the Kyiv-based Institute for Religious Freedom in a video interview published on 22 September. "Now services are not taking place – during this turmoil, we suspended religious activities because people are

intimidated."

The Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in Shchastlivtseve remains closed, with few members still in the town, Asanov told Forum 18 on 11 October.

The telephone of the (Russian) Police in Henichesk District was not answered each time Forum 18 called between 18 and October.

Kherson Region: Christian Institute seized, Pastor and local residents seized

On 9 March, the Russian military seized the Baptist Taurida Christian Institute in the village of Antonivka, Kherson Region, and turned it into a military base. Soldiers damaged buildings and stole property, the Institute for Religious Freedom noted.

Russian military seized a number of local residents, including a Protestant pastor in Kakhovka District of Kherson Region, the (Ukrainian) Kherson Regional Police announced on Facebook on 17 September. Police did not name the pastor.

Kherson Region: Hospital chapel seized

On 20 August, the Russian military and a doctor Irina Sviridova came to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU)'s St Barbara chapel at Kherson City Clinical Hospital. Sviridova said that as the hospital has passed to Russian control, "the current agreement on the community's stay in the church building has been annulled", OCU priest Fr Serhiy Dmitriev (who is in Ukrainian government-held territory) told Suspilne.media news website on 1 September. "Irina Sviridova said that she could not do anything, she was given an order. The only thing she did was that they allowed us to take everything away and did not take the icons from us. They gave two days for their removal."

The hospital chapel - which has functioned since the 2000s - also housed a social assistance centre. Following the Russian invasion of the area, a Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox priest had tried to take over the chapel, but had not received the blessing of his bishop to do so.

Who to affiliate with, pray for?

Russian military and other occupation officials have demanded that religious communities and leaders affiliate with Russian instead of Ukrainian religious entities.

While Imam Asanov was being held and tortured in early March by Russian forces (see above), one man in civilian clothes insisted that he co-operate with the occupation authorities. The man would not give his name, but gave his call sign as "Bars" (Leopard). Imam Asanov suspects from "Bars'" manner that he was from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

"Bars" also insisted that Imam Asanov cut the community's ties to the Spiritual Administration in Kyiv and subjugate his mosque community to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea in the occupied Ukrainian city of Simferopol. He complained that this organisation "went over to the Russian side" following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, describing its leaders as "traitors".

"Bars" also told Asanov that in time, all religious communities in Russian-occupied territory would be required to re-register with Russia's Justice Ministry under Russian law, Asanov told Forum 18. "Ukraine won't exist," "Bars" told him.

Imam Asanov fled from Russian-occupied territory to Ukrainian government-held territory in late March.

At least one priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC) faced problems over praying for Ukraine during the liturgy. Archimandrite Feognost Pushkov, a UOC priest who serves in the village of Kuryachivka in Luhansk Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), was on 30 May visited by three Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) security officers. They talked to him on the street in the village of Prosyanoie without entering his home, checked his phone, and promised to visit his church on the Sunday of the Holy Trinity.

The LPR security officers then offered Fr Feognost three options: to end his criticism of the Russian armed forces, deportation to "Western Ukraine", or arrest. He told his readers on Telegram that while he considered "what had happened" (Russia's renewed invasion) illegal, he was unable to continue to speak out so critically. "It is very bitter that we found ourselves in conditions of lack of freedom!"

The following day, Fr Feognost decided to stop praying for "God-protected Ukraine, its authorities and armies" as he feared that the rebel Luhansk authorities might interpret this as "separatism".

Archimandrite Feognost explained on Telegram that "as I do not accept the LPR juridically", and thought praying for an undetermined "our country" unacceptable, he chose instead to pray for "God-protected Luhansk lands" and peace instead. "My

prayer is demilitarised to the limit and should not cause any criticism if our church is visited by those who, on the contrary, are militarised to the limit."

On 10 June, the Luhansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC) held a Diocesan Council, which voted to reject the 27 May changes agreed by the UOC Synod in Kyiv to distance the Church from the Moscow Patriarchate. The Luhansk Diocese decided to stop commemorating in the liturgy Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky), the UOC head, and to ask Patriarch Kirill to take the Diocese under his direct jurisdiction.

"They put pressure on Metropolitan Panteleimon [Povoroznyuk] for a long time," UOC Archimandrite Feognost noted on Telegram on 11 June, citing a cleric and a layperson from Luhansk. "He didn't make up his mind until the last minute. He faced pressure not just from the LPR authorities, but from its zealous supporters among the local 'influencers' in cassocks!" (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Occupied Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>)

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