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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "There is no one to replace the arrested priests"

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

Russia's National Guard seized two priests in Russian-occupied Berdyansk on 16 November. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate denies Russian claims that Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta stored explosives in the church and had "extremist" literature. Fr Bohdan needs regular medicine. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life." On 26 November, the tortured and shot bodies of Pentecostal deacon Anatoly Prokopchuk and his son were found, four days after the Russian military seized them.

On 16 November, Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) arrested the two Ukrainian Greek Catholic parish priests in the Black Sea coastal town of Berdyansk (Zaporizhzhia Region), Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta. The following day, Russian forces searched the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin and claim to have found explosives and "extremist" literature. It appears that the Russian occupation forces are considering bringing one or both priests to trial on terrorism charges.

Fr Ivan had taken part in pro-Ukrainian demonstrations until the invaders banned such peaceful protest. Following the ban, he had continued to pray each day at 12 noon at the 'I love Berdyansk' installation in the town centre (see below).

"Although the 'administration' installed in the territories captured by Russian troops accuses our priests - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta - of storing explosives and weapons, as well as supporting 'partisan' activities, we emphasise that the only reason the priests were detained and illegally held is their loyalty to their people and their Church," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia (see below).

The Donetsk Exarchate called for the two priests to be freed immediately and noted that Fr Bohdan needs regular medication for a health condition. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life," it warned (see below).

"At the moment, the church is not operational, as there is no one to replace the arrested priests," the Donetsk Exarchate added. "All parish activities have stopped" (see below).

Officers of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya)'s Southern Region in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don on 30 November refused to give Forum 18 contacts for Rosgvardiya in Berdyansk or Zaporizhzhia Region of Ukraine (see below).

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

Russia's military began its renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February and captured Berdyansk three days later. It has remained under Russian occupation since then.

Earlier in the year, Russian forces in Berdyansk had seized a Ukrainian Orthodox priest and a Lutheran leader. Both were soon freed (see below).

On 25 November, Russian forces detained Fr Peter Krenický, parish priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region. They released him the same day, but forced him to leave for Ukrainian government-held territory. "Fortunately, Fr Peter is now safe - he was 'deported' to Zaporizhzhia," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 (see below).

Elsewhere in parts of Ukraine under Russian occupation, "a small number of our parishes continue their activities", the Donetsk Exarchate noted.

On 22 November, the Russian military seized a businessman and Pentecostal deacon 52-year-old Anatoly Prokopchuk and his 19-year-old son Aleksandr Prokopchuk, who lived in Nova Kakhovka in Kherson Region. On 26 November, their shot and mutilated bodies were found in a nearby wood (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to find out if Anatoly and Aleksandr Prokopchuk were seized, tortured and killed to punish their exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Forum 18 was unable to reach the Russian military in Nova Kakhovka or the town's Russian-controlled police (see below).

The man who answered the phone at the (Russian) Kherson Region Anti-Terrorism Centre put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 began asking about the kidnapping and murder of Anatoly and Aleksandr Prokopchuk (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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), 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 late November, Russia occupies about 70 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 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) to "halt the activity of political parties, public organisations and religious associations conducting propaganda and/or agitation as well as other subversive activity".

Russians seize religious leaders

Russian forces have seized many religious leaders of a variety of religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784). 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) 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.

On 21 September, masked Russian soldiers came to the home of Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in the city of Mariupol in Donetsk Region, and his wife Tatyana. Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov's neighbours "distinctly heard groans and cries" as the masked men took Leonid and Tatyana away (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779) "in an unknown direction". The Ponomaryovs were initially taken to a police station, and despite Baptists' attempts to find out where they were the occupation authorities gave no information.

On 21 October, Tatyana and Leonid Ponomaryov were freed and reunited with relatives and church members (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

Berdyansk: Earlier kidnappings

In March, Russian police in Berdyansk searched the home of Oleh Nikolayev, a priest from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (a Church recognised as autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019), and took him away, the diocese noted on 14 March. Russian police freed him soon afterwards.

Russian forces detained the Head of Berdyansk's German Lutheran Church, Artur Kozhevnikov, while he was walking in the town centre on 9 April. They took him to the police station, where the Russian military had established their headquarters.

"There has been no contact with him since the day of his detention," Ukraine's German Lutheran Church noted on its website on 16 April. "The military commandant does not receive visitors about this case, and no information about the fate of the detainee has been received from the commandant's office." The Russians freed Kozhevnikov in early May, church members told Forum 18.

Kozhevnikov had been involved in the restoration of the community in 1997 and has served as the chair of the Church Council for more than 20 years. He is also engaged in social and musical service.

Berdiansk's German Lutheran congregation continues to meet for worship in its 120-year-old building.

Berdiansk: Russia's National Guard seizes two Greek Catholic priests

On 16 November, Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) arrested two parish priests in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the Black Sea coastal town of Berdiansk (Zaporizhzhia Region), Hieromonk Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta. Russia's National Guard reports directly to the Russian President.

The following day, Russian forces searched Berdiansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin - where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan serve - and claim to have found explosives and "extremist" literature. It appears that the Russian occupation forces are considering bringing the two priests to trial on terrorism charges.

The Russian occupation authorities appear to have made no public statement about the arrests of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan, nor about the accusations against them, nor which agency is carrying out the investigation.

On 24 November, the Russian media broadcast reports about the arrest of the priests, including on Zvezda TV (a channel linked to the Russian military) and on the Izvestiya website. Both claimed that investigators had found explosives, detonators and pistols. Zvezda TV showed Fr Ivan talking, where he points out that he had not been present during the search of the church premises.

"In addition," Zvezda TV declared, "in the monastery library were many books connected with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, as well as literature by priests who served the Hitlerite regime in the second world war. In Russia these authors are banned, but in Ukraine they are considered practically as saints."

Zvezda TV and Izvestiya's video reports showed a masked man in uniform holding up books to the camera, including a collection of sermons by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944.

A Moscow court ruled in March 2013 that a small book with a sermon by Metropolitan Sheptytsky – republished in Ukrainian in Poland in 1990 – was "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1899). Russia's Justice Ministry then added the book to its Federal List of Extremist Materials. This banned the book from being produced or distributed in Russia, and meant that anyone possessing it could be prosecuted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215). No other book by or about Metropolitan Sheptytsky appears to be on the Russian Federal List. During the Second World War, Metropolitan Sheptytsky protected Jews from the Holocaust (<https://www.adl.org/news/article/abraham-h-foxman-posthumous-presentation-of-adl-jan-karski-courage-to-care-award-to>), by supplying false identification papers and shelter from the Nazis at a time when such acts were punishable by death. He also publicly condemned the Holocaust, including by writing directly to the Nazi leadership.

In 2014, soon after the Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) several times summoned for questioning Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest Fr Bogdan Kostetsky, who served in the Holy Virgin parish in Yevpatoriya. Among other questions, Russian FSB officers asked him about his attitude to Metropolitan Sheptytsky (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1992).

In May, the Russian-controlled Culture Ministry in Donetsk began a programme of removing from public libraries literature that it regards as "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784). Items removed included not only books on Ukrainian culture and history and books about Adolf Hitler, but books on "political and religious figures".

Zvezda TV also claimed that Fr Ivan had called on people "to sabotage the activities of the administration and to resist the Russian military. He also held prayers in support of the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian regime." It said that a court would determine Fr Ivan's fate, but without giving details of who might be investigating him, on what charges and which court might eventually hear any case.

Officers of Rosgvardiya's Southern Region in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don on 30 November refused to give Forum 18 contacts for Rosgvardiya in Berdiansk or Zaporizhzhia Region of Ukraine.

The telephone at the (Russian) Berdiansk District Police was not answered or was busy each time Forum 18 called on 29 and 30 November.

Donetsk Exarchate rejects Russian accusations

On 25 November, the Donetsk Exarchate posted a statement on its website refuting the accusations against Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan

and calling for their release.

Fr Ivan had taken part in pro-Ukrainian demonstrations until the invaders banned such peaceful protest. Following the ban, he had continued to pray each day at 12 noon at the 'I love Berdyansk' installation in the town centre.

"Although the 'administration' installed in the territories captured by Russian troops accuses our priests - Fr Ivan Levitsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta - of storing explosives and weapons, as well as supporting 'partisan' activities, we emphasise that the only reason the priests were detained and illegally held is their loyalty to their people and their Church," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia on 29 November.

The Donetsk Exarchate rejects Russian accusations that explosive materials had been stored in the church. "Such information is now widely disseminated by the Russian propaganda media, but we strongly reject such accusations," it told Forum 18. "All the so-called 'evidence' shown by the representatives of the occupation administration was discovered during the search, when both priests had already been arrested and were not on the territory of the parish. These accusations are obvious defamation and provocation."

The Donetsk Exarchate similarly rejects Russian accusations that the Church had "extremist" literature. It noted that Russian media showed books by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the first half of the 20th century.

"It is interesting that Metropolitan Andrey is a figure revered not only in Ukraine and even not only by Christians. The metropolitan, whom the Russians accuse of Nazism, is known in particular for saving a large number of Jews from death in concentration camps during the Second World War. And those who came, as they themselves claim, 'to fight Nazism', find extremism in his works.."

The Donetsk Exarchate issued a further "urgent statement" on 30 November, saying that it had had no contact with Fr Ivan or Fr Bohdan. It fears that Russian forces may use torture against the priests to try to secure a "confession" that they had stored weapons. "A 'confession' may be necessary for a so-called 'court' to pass sentence and punish our clergy illegally," the Exarchate warned.

The Exarchate renewed its call for its two priests to be freed and stressed that Fr Bohdan needs regular medication for a health condition. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life."

Melitopol: Priest detained then "deported"

On 25 November, Russian forces detained Fr Peter Krenický, the parish priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Assumption of Saint Anna Church in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region. "They put him in a car, put a bag on his head, took him to Vasylivka and dumped him there," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia on 29 November. Russian forces then forced Fr Peter to leave for Ukrainian government-held territory.

"Fortunately, Fr Peter is now safe - he was 'deported' to Zaporizhzhia," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18.

Services continue at Melitopol's Assumption of Saint Anna Church.

Nova Kakhovka: Pentecostal father and son seized, tortured, executed

On the evening of 22 November, the Russian military seized a businessman and Pentecostal deacon 52-year-old Anatoly Prokopchuk and his 19-year-old son Aleksandr Prokopchuk, who lived in Nova Kakhovka in Kherson Region on the eastern side of the Dnipro River. Relatives and friends said Russian forces seized the father and son as they were working in their garage.

On 26 November, their shot and mutilated bodies were found in a nearby wood, the Centre of Journalistic Investigations noted on 28 November, citing their friends. They were buried on 29 November.

"Even during the war and the Russian occupation, they continued to serve God and people, in the church and in society," Anatoly Prokopchuk's brother-in-law Ivan Leshchuk wrote on Facebook from California on 28 November. "They preached, organised, sang, played, distributed food, prayed and comforted those in need."

Forum 18 was unable to find out if Anatoly and Aleksandr Prokopchuk were seized, tortured and killed to punish their exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Forum 18 was unable to reach the Russian military in Nova Kakhovka.

The man who answered the phone at the (Russian) Kherson Region Anti-Terrorism Centre put the phone down on 29 November as soon as Forum 18 began asking about the kidnapping and murder of Anatoly and Aleksandr Prokopchuk.

The telephone at the (Russian) Nova Kakhovka Police was not answered or was busy each time Forum 18 called on 29 and 30 November. (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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