

13 October 2023

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Russian occupation forces close more churches, broadcast disinformation

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

Russian occupation forces have closed and seized more churches, the latest known being an Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) church in Basan and a Baptist Union church in Zaporizhzhia Region, and the Catholic Church in Skadovsk in Kherson Region. Occupation forces broke the Catholic church's windows and door during a raid, claiming they were looking for explosives and drugs. Artyom Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department claimed to Forum 18 that "law-abiding" religious communities "face no restrictions, but those that break the law are banned".

Russian occupation forces have closed and seized more churches in occupied parts of Ukraine. Among those forcibly closed in recent months are an Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) church in Basan and a Baptist Union church in occupied parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region, and the Catholic Church in Skadovsk in occupied parts of Ukraine's Kherson Region.

Russian occupation forces in the village of Basan in Zaporizhzhia Region "discovered and halted the activity of an unregistered religious association" of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the occupation forces claimed to the Russian media in June (see below).

Occupation forces also filmed a video interview with parish priest Fr Serhi Moskovets, possibly against his will, where he admitted that he had held religious meetings without Russian permission and against Russian law, and promised not to do so in future. Fr Serhi also stated that he had books with allegedly anti-Russian content. He held up to the camera several booklets, including "Why I want to be Orthodox but without the Moscow Patriarchate" and "Teachers of lies under the mask of 'defenders of Orthodoxy'" (see below).

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, told Forum 18 that he could not say if the parish would meet for worship again. "The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) is pro-Western and this is bad," Sharlay added. "It has links with Ukrainian special services, which it shouldn't have. Western countries want there to be as many casualties as possible in Ukraine," he claimed without producing any evidence (see below).

Sharlay insisted that only "law-abiding" religious communities are allowed to exist in the parts of the Ukrainian region the occupiers control. "Those which are law-abiding – like Adventists and Baptists – face no restrictions, but those that break the law are banned," Sharlay claimed to Forum 18. "Some stored weapons, explosives and radio equipment in their places of worship or were financed from the United States," he claimed – yet again without producing any evidence (see below).

Despite Sharlay's claims, Russian occupation forces have closed and seized Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist and other churches in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region (see below).

Sharlay insisted (also without producing evidence) that the two priests Russia's National Guard "disappeared" in Berdyansk in November 2022 - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta - stored weapons in their church. There is no information about where the priests are, their state of health – or if they are still alive. Sharlay claimed to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) that the two priests will face trial "as soon as new courts are established here".

Russian occupation forces in Zaporizhzhia Region seized another church of the Baptist Union in September, bringing to seven the number confiscated in territory they have captured since the full scale invasion of Ukraine from February 2022. Sharlay did not explain to Forum 18 why occupation forces seized the church (see below).

On 22 August, Russian occupation forces searched the Catholic Church of St Therese of the Child Jesus in Skadovsk in Ukraine's Kherson Region. The occupiers broke the Church's windows and door, claiming that they were allegedly looking for explosives and drugs. Parishioners used to gather in the church for prayer, but Russian officials have now banned this (see below).

Kherson Region's Russian occupation police have not replied to Forum 18's questions about why armed police raided and searched the Catholic Church, breaking its door and windows, and why Catholics have been banned from meeting for worship in the church (see below).

In the first known case in parts of Ukraine Russia illegally invaded and claimed to have annexed in 2022, Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Feognost (Timofei Pushkov) is facing prosecution under Russia's Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). However, after a hearing on 30 May 2023 the case was returned to police for further work and as of 13 October has not returned to court (see below).

In addition to closing and seizing places of worship and interrogating religious leaders, Russian occupation forces have seized religious leaders of a variety of faiths. Some have been tortured in Russian custody. These include Imam Rustem Asanov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), a Crimean Tatar, of the Birlik (Unity) Mosque in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region. Some leaders were released after days, weeks or even months in Russian custody, such as Leonid Ponomaryov, Pastor of a Baptist Council of Churches congregation in Mariupol, and his wife Tatyana who were held from 21 September to 21 October 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808).

At least three religious leaders are currently "disappeared": Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta; and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov. Two other Orthodox priests were fined and ordered "deported" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867).

On 1 October, the state-owned Russia-1 television channel in Moscow broadcast a 10-minute film from occupied parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. The film attacked the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Protestants, Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses and repeated many of the disinformation messages used by Russian official commentators and state media. Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department, who took part in the film, insisted to Forum 18 on 12 October that all the accusations against the religious communities are true (see below).

Freedom of religion and belief is with other human rights severely restricted within all Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine (see below).

Zaporizhzhia Region: Russian occupiers forcibly close Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) parish

Russian occupation forces in the village of Basan in Zaporizhzhia Region "discovered and halted the activity of an unregistered religious association" of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), the occupation forces claimed to the Russian media, including the Tass and RIA Novosti news agencies, on 7 June. The parish was led by Fr Serhi Moskovets.

Russian occupation forces searched the premises where Fr Serhi and parishioners met for worship. "Operational personnel discovered anti-Russian literature, including that directed at discrediting the Russian Orthodox Church," the occupation forces claimed to the Russian media. The occupiers also claimed to have discovered a Ukrainian uniform from the time when Fr Serhi served as a chaplain in the Ukrainian army.

Russian occupation forces filmed a video interview with Fr Serhi, possibly against his will, where he admitted that he had held religious meetings without Russian permission and against Russian law, and promised not to do so in future. Fr Serhi also stated that he had books with allegedly anti-Russian content. He held up to the camera several booklets, including "Why I want to be Orthodox but without the Moscow Patriarchate" and "Teachers of lies under the mask of 'defenders of Orthodoxy'."

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, told Forum 18 that he had been given no information about Fr Serhi and his parish.

Sharlay told Forum 18 he could not say if the parish would meet for worship again. "Officially there is no ban on the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. But maybe among its priests and parishioners there are extremists," he told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 12 October.

"The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) is pro-Western and this is bad," Sharlay added. "It has links with Ukrainian special services, which it shouldn't have. Western countries want there to be as many casualties as possible in Ukraine," he claimed without producing any evidence. "Other Orthodox Church of Ukraine priests," he claimed "left voluntarily."

Zaporizhzhia Region: Only "law-abiding" religious communities allowed to exist

Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department insisted that only "law-abiding" religious communities are allowed to exist in the parts of the Ukrainian region the occupiers control.

"Those which are law-abiding – like Adventists and Baptists – face no restrictions, but those that break the law are banned," Sharlay claimed to Forum 18. "Some stored weapons, explosives and radio equipment in their places of worship or were financed from the United States," he claimed – yet again without producing any evidence.

Adventist, Baptist and other churches in Sharlay's occupied Zaporizhzhia Region have been closed and seized by the Russian occupation forces (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784). For example, the occupation forces seized Melitopol's Grace Baptist in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832) after raiding it during a Sunday meeting for worship. Occupation forces have removed the cross from the top of the building, repainted the front brown, and posted four portraits of Russian soldiers high up on the facade of the building. The building is now used by the occupation forces as an administrative centre. The Russian Melitopol City Administration would not answer Forum 18's questions about why Russian forces have closed and confiscated places of worship in the city.

Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department identified communities he objected to, including Word of Life and Grace Protestant Churches (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799). "They organised mass disturbances in March 2022," he claimed on 12 October 2023, referring to the time immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region.

Sharlay was especially critical of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. "This has never been traditional in this area," he claimed, also claiming it "represents an expansion of Western culture," he told Forum 18. Sharlay did not explain why these claims justified human rights violations.

Sharlay insisted (also without producing evidence) that the two priests Russia's National Guard "disappeared" in Berdyansk in November 2022 - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta - stored weapons in their church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793). There is no information about where the priests are, their state of health – or if they are still alive. Sharlay claimed to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) that the two priests will face trial "as soon as new courts are established here".

When in May 2023 Forum 18 asked the Russian Berdyansk Police where the priests are, they replied (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832): "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." The occupation police officer refused to give any evidence for this claim and put the phone down.

Zaporizhzhia Region: Seventh Baptist Union church building seized

Russian occupation forces seized another church of the Baptist Union in September, this time in Zaporizhzhia Region. Ukraine's Baptist Union confirmed the latest seizure in to Forum 18 on 12 October. This brings to seven the number of churches confiscated in territory Russian forces have captured since the full scale invasion of Ukraine from February 2022.

The other six Baptist Union churches previously seized are located in parts of Donetsk Region captured since the renewed Russian invasion.

The occupation authorities claimed that a mine had allegedly been planted in the seized Zaporizhzhia Region church, Voice of the Martyrs Korea noted on 26 September. Officials banned the church from holding further meetings for worship in the building, but permitted church members to enter it to retrieve their communion supplies. "We are praying for those who have moved into the House of Prayer," Voice of the Martyrs Korea quoted the pastor as declaring.

"At the moment, the military has occupied the House of Prayer and are living there," the pastor of another Baptist church seized earlier told Voice of the Martyrs Korea. "The reason is explained by the fact that the higher authorities did not allow the worship service to be held [in the building]."

Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department did not explain to Forum 18 why the occupation forces had seized the Baptist church.

Kherson Region: Catholic church raided, closed in "anti-terrorist operation"

On 22 August, Russian occupation forces searched the Roman Catholic Church of St Therese of the Child Jesus in the coastal town of Skadovsk in Ukraine's Kherson Region. The area has been occupied since March 2022. The occupiers broke the Church's windows and door, claiming that they were allegedly looking for explosives and drugs. Parish priest Fr Dominik Fiszer is now in his native Poland.

"A group of armed special forces with masked weapons surrounded the Roman Catholic chapel, broke down the door and broke into the chapel and began a search. Parishioners were informed that it was a special operation against terrorists," Bishop Stanislav Shirokoradiuk of the Odessa-Simferopol Diocese said in a 23 August 2023 statement.

"They were looking for terrorists. Fortunately, there were no people in the church, because everyone would have been captured by now. The search continued until the evening. The occupiers said that the Catholic priest who served here before was a drug lord. For some reason, the windows in the temple were broken."

Parishioners used to gather in the church for prayer, but Russian officials have now banned this. "No one has the right to enter there," Bishop Shirokoradiuk said. "Because there are supposed to be terrorists there. I am sure that they will find explosives there, and they will find weapons, and they will find everything they want."

Forum 18 asked the Press Service of Kherson Region's Russian occupation police in writing on 11 October why armed police had raided and searched Skadovsk's Catholic church, breaking its door and windows. Forum 18 also asked why Catholics have been banned from meeting for worship in the church. Forum 18 had received no response by the middle of the working day in Kherson Region of 13 October.

Luhansk Region: "Discreditation" case on hold?

In the first known case in parts of Ukraine Russia illegally invaded and claimed to have annexed in 2022, Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Feognost (Timofei Pushkov) is facing prosecution under Russia's Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737), Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Following Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine from February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law on 4 April 2022 new punishments for criticising Russia's actions in its war against Ukraine. Since 2022, Russia has in Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2774) - which it illegally claims to have annexed in 2014 - imposed more than 100 punishments under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 for "discreditation" of Russia's armed forces.

The four other occupied or partially-occupied regions of Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>) – Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk (where Fr Feognost is facing prosecution), which Russia illegally claimed to have annexed in 2022 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492>) – began imposing punishments under Russia's Criminal and Administrative Codes in late 2022 in courts which Russia controls. As the territories are occupied, this is illegal under international law (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-64/commentary/1958?activeTab=undefined>) as Russia is required to leave Ukrainian law in force.

The 43-year-old Fr Feognost is a priest of the Luhansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. He lives in the village of Prosyanoe near Markivka and serves as a supernumerary priest at the parish of St Nikolai in the village of Kuryachivka in Starobilsk District of Ukraine's Luhansk Region, 25 kms (15 miles) from the border with Russia.

In Russia with its internationally-recognised boundaries, Moscow Patriarchate priests have come under pressure from both the Patriarchate and the government (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) to support the war, and have been punished if they oppose it.

Fr Feognost is being prosecuted for a video he posted (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833) on YouTube on 12 May 2022 discussing how his views on patriotism based on Christian principles differed from those of three pro-war Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) priests. He says the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Moscow alerted the FSB in Russian-occupied Luhansk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), which then sought a "psycholinguistic expert analysis" from an employee of a university in Luhansk. The "expert examination" was "carried out according to the most loyal of formulas" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833) and found that he "discredited, worked for the enemy."

The Russian Markivka District Prosecutor then handed a case against Fr Feognost to the police (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833) on 26 April 2023. Markivka District Police chief Lieutenant-Colonel Aleksandr Mulyar handed the case to court.

Judge Roman Shulga of Markivka District Court was due to hear the case on 30 May. However, before the hearing took place the FSB took Fr Feognost's case file from the court. Officers returned it on 26 May, demanding that the occupation police conduct "further work" on the case, Fr Feognost noted on his Telegram channel on 1 June. No hearing therefore took place on 30 May.

"They again told the cops: It turns out that there is a psycholinguistic study, but there is no expert analysis of the same name, and the latter is not done in the LPR [Luhansk People's Republic], but only in the Russian Federation," Fr Feognost noted. He added that the case had brought him great stress. "My nerves are terribly tense."

The duty officer refused to put Forum 18 through in May to Lieutenant-Colonel Aleksandr Mulyar, head of the Russian-controlled Markivka District Police, who prepared the record of an offence against Fr Feognost.

As of 13 October, the case does not appear to have been returned to court.

Russian state television attacks religious communities in occupied Ukraine

On 1 October, the state-owned Russia-1 television channel in Moscow broadcast a 10-minute film from occupied parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. The film attacked the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Protestants, Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses and repeated some of the many disinformation messages (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ukraine/?numberposts=50>) used by Russian official commentators and state media.

Russian occupation forces often broadcast disinformation about religious believers and communities in occupied Ukraine which do not support the renewed invasion. In one example, on 20 April the pro-Russian Berdyansk.Aktualno Telegram channel published a film making unsubstantiated claims about the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832) in Berdyansk.

In the 1 October 10 minute Russia-1 TV film, Yelena Yerofeyeva claimed that "in Berdyansk alone there were 36 odious sects", while in Melitopol there were "even more". She claimed that two churches of Berdyansk Orthodox diocese, which "voluntarily went under the control of schismatics", are now empty after their priests allegedly fled to government-controlled Ukraine.

Berdyansk's Catholic priest "fled abroad", Yerofeyeva falsely claimed. (In reality, Fr Mateusz Godek told Forum 18 that he was not in the city at the time of the February 2022 Russian invasion (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832), and has not been able to return to Berdyansk because of the invasion.) "For eight years in this Catholic church they educated Nazis," Yerofeyeva also claimed without any evidence. "Here was the base for the Azov regiment."

The Russian occupier's media has made other unsubstantiated claims about Berdyansk's Catholic Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832). Occupation media has also stated that the city's Latin-rite Catholic priest was close to the city's two Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, who were in November 2022 "disappeared" by the Russian occupation forces (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793). There is no information about where they are, their state of health – or if they are still alive (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867).

When in May 2023 Forum 18 asked the Russian Berdyansk Police where the priests are, they replied (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832): "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." The occupation police officer refused to give any evidence for this claim and put the phone down.

Immediately after the Russia-1 film showed footage of Berdyansk's Catholic Church, Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Luka (Volchkov), administrator of Berdyansk's Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Diocese claimed to Yerofeyeva: "They created there an entire Hitler Jugend." Luka produced no evidence for his claim.

Also in the Russia-1 TV channel broadcast, Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department criticised many of the local Protestant communities. He claimed without producing evidence that one of their leaders in Melitopol, who had American citizenship, "was here on [an intelligence] mission".

Sharlay also claimed that in sharing their faith among the population, Jehovah's Witnesses were looking for people to recruit. "We have information that they conducted a certain intelligence activity," he claimed without producing evidence.

"In leaving Vosnesenky, Jehovah's Witnesses not only turned off the lights: they burned the entire building where they held meetings so that the Russians wouldn't get hold of it," Yerofeyeva of Russia-1 claimed.

Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department defended Yerofeyeva's claims and his contribution to her 10 minute film. He insisted to Forum 18 on 12 October that all the accusations against the religious communities she mentioned are true.

The switchboard at Russia-1 TV in Moscow refused on 12 October to put Forum 18 through to Yerofeyeva.

In 2018, Estonia banned Yerofeyeva and another Russia-1 TV journalist from entering the Schengen Area for five years "for ridiculing Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious group and inciting hatred towards them". The two Russia-1 employees used hidden cameras and concealed the real purpose of their visit. The Estonian Internal Security Service (KAPO) noted in its Annual Review 2018 (https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Annual%20Review%202018.pdf) that Yerofeyeva and her colleague's actions "have the characteristics of religious discrimination against persons, which in turn may develop into incitement of hatred as defined in Section 151 of the Estonian Penal Code".

Freedom of religion or belief repression in 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 2022, 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 (LPR) and the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), 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.

Since the illegal imposition of Russian law on occupied Ukrainian territory in October 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808), Russian officials insist that religious communities must register under Russian law to continue to be allowed to exist.

Russia's tax authorities have registered four religious communities in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Berdyansk Diocese, two other Russian Orthodox parishes and a Protestant church. Russia's tax authorities have registered just one religious community in the occupied part of Kherson Region, a Pentecostal Church in Henichesk.

Russia's tax authorities have registered 206 religious communities in the occupied part of Ukraine's Donetsk Region (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>), almost all of them copied across from the DPR registration list. Russia's tax authorities have registered 202 religious communities in the occupied part of Ukraine's Luhansk Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), almost all of them copied across from the LPR registration list.

Forum 18 asked Oleg Pomnikov of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in February why no Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Kyiv Patriarchate or Jehovah's Witness communities have been allowed to register in Luhansk Region. He claimed that the absence of such registered communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) "reflects the local population". (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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