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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Detained, fined, ordered "deported"

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

On 22 September, a court in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region found Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) guilty of violating Russian law on missionary activity. The Judge punished each with a fine of 30,000 Russian Roubles and "deportation beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation". Fr Andri has appealed. Russian occupation officials earlier tried to pressure the priests to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church. Armed men raided two Baptist churches in Zaporizhzhia Region and ordered a third to close.

On 22 September, Telmanovo District Court in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region found two priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) guilty of violating Russian law on missionary activity. The Judge punished Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui each with a fine of 30,000 Russian Roubles and "deportation beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation", a court official told Forum 18. Fr Andri has appealed against his punishment. Both priests are Ukrainian citizens.

Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri "carried out religious activity posing as representatives of the religious association the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), whose activity is of an anti-Russian, extremist nature, expressed in public support for the Ukrainian authorities and armed formations of Ukraine, as well as inciting hatred and discord on an ethnic and religious basis", the Russian news agency RIA Novosti quoted the court decisions as declaring (see below).

The court official – who did not give her name – refused to say whether the head of Telmanovo District Court, Judge Nikolai Boiko, heard the cases (see below).

"Fr Khristofor is a good and very decent man. He was constantly in fasting and prayer. But some people didn't like this," his Bishop, OCU Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol, noted after the Russian occupation forces detained the two priests in mid-September. "All the time Father Andri tried to help the needy and disadvantaged, he was constantly in prayer for his parishioners" (see below).

Metropolitan Serhy said Russian occupation officials had earlier tried to pressure the priests to transfer from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to the Russian Orthodox Church (see below).

Russian occupation forces try to pressure religious leaders to change their affiliation to communities based in Russia and which support Russia's war against Ukraine. Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest Fr Vladimir Saviisky of St Nicholas Church in Primorsk faced pressure to join calls in April for the transfer of the Berdyansk Diocese from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate to come directly under the Russian Orthodox Church (see below).

Russian soldiers "drove me around the city, demanding that I accept this decision of the Moscow Synod that the Berdyansk Diocese had now transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church," Fr Vladimir told Current Time. "I said that I remain a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (OCU), I am a Ukrainian priest." He fled the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region in June (see below).

On 18 August, Russian military raided a Council of Churches Baptist youth camp in Rainivka close to the Black Sea coast in Zaporizhzhia Region. A local administration official and a soldier told the home owner later that they intend to base Russian soldiers in the house (see below).

On 8 October, armed and masked men in military uniform raided the Sunday meeting for worship of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Melitopol, which has close ties with the Rainivka congregation. Officials later asked Pastor Dmitry Malakhov when he joined the church, when he became its pastor, who else preaches to the congregation and where the church gets copies of the Baptist newspaper "Do you believe?"

Officials told Pastor Malakhov they were preparing a record of an offence and said this would be handed to the Prosecutor's Office. They warned him the police would summon him and he would then face a court and a fine of 10,000 Russian Roubles. They added that until they get Russian registration, the church cannot meet (see below).

Forum 18 could not find out why the Russian occupation authorities raided the Baptist churches in Rainivka and Melitopol, and why they threatened the pastor in Melitopol with prosecution and banned the church from meeting for worship. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone (see below).

The man who answered the phone at a Russian military centre in Melitopol – who did not give his name – denied to Forum 18 that any soldiers of the Russian army had taken part in the 18 August or 8 October raids on the Baptist communities (see below).

On 23 October, Russian occupation forces seized the Central Baptist Church in Melitopol, a congregation of the Baptist Union. "The church held its Sunday worship service on 22 October. But officials came on Monday and told them that until the church is registered under Russian law it cannot function," Baptists told Forum 18. "They closed and sealed the church" (see below).

Donetsk Region: Two Orthodox priests detained, fined, ordered "deported"

On 17 September, the Russian occupation authorities in Donetsk Region seized Fr Khristofor Khrimli. The following day they seized Fr Andri Chui. Both are priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and are Ukrainian citizens. Fr Khristofor served at Holy Trinity parish in the village of Andriivka as well as the Resurrection of the Lord parish in Kamyanka. Fr Andri served in Donetsk.

"Fr Khristofor is a good and very decent man. He was constantly in fasting and prayer. But some people didn't like this," his Bishop, Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol, noted on Facebook. "All the time Father Andri tried to help the needy and disadvantaged, he was constantly in prayer for his parishioners."

Russian officials appear to have taken the two priests to the Investigation Prison in Donetsk, Metropolitan Serhy told Novosti Donbassa news website on 3 October. He said relatives had been able to hand in medicines, clothes and food to them there.

Metropolitan Serhy said Russian occupation officials had tried to pressure the priests to transfer from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russian occupation officials have similarly pressured other religious leaders to transfer to different religious communities which the occupation authorities regard more favourably (see below).

Cases against both priests were prepared under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246)). This incurs a fine of 30,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles with the possibility of deportation. A fine of 50,000 Russian Roubles represents more than two months' average local wages for those in work.

The cases were handed to the District Court in Telmanovo (which Ukraine has renamed Boikivske), in the District where Fr Khristofor was serving.

In separate hearings on the afternoon of 22 September, a Judge at Telmanovo District Court found Fr Khristofor (under his secular name Vyacheslav Khrimli) and Fr Andri guilty. The Judge punished Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri each with a fine of 30,000 Russian Roubles and "deportation beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation", a court official told Forum 18 on 24 October.

The official – who did not give her name – refused to say whether the head of the court, Judge Nikolai Boiko, heard the cases.

According to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti on 3 October, the court decisions said that Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri "carried out religious activity posing as representatives of the religious association the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), whose activity is of an anti-Russian, extremist nature, expressed in public support for the Ukrainian authorities and armed formations of Ukraine, as well as inciting hatred and discord on an ethnic and religious basis".

The court official said that only Fr Andri had appealed against the decision. "Any appeal goes directly to the Supreme Court in Moscow," she told Forum 18. She refused to say whether Fr Khristofor had had time to lodge an appeal before being deported.

"The organisation under the name the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was formed by schismatics, and is therefore not a church in the canonical understanding," RIA Novosti declared in its report on the cases. It did not say if this was its view or whether it was quoting the court decisions.

Metropolitan Serhy said relatives taking items to the prison for Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri were told they were no longer there. "Then they sent information that they had been taken to the Russian Federation," he told Novosti Donbassa news website on 3 October. He said the diocese had no contact with them.

Religious figures held for days, weeks, months

Russian occupation forces have seized religious leaders of a variety of faiths since their renewed invasion of Ukraine from February 2022. Greek Catholic priests Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta were disappeared in November 2022, and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov in May 2023. No news has been heard of their fate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867).

It remains unclear in many of the cases whether the seizure of religious leaders aimed to punish them for their exercise of freedom of religion or belief in ways the Russian occupation authorities did not like. However, all those seized were known to play a leading role in their own religious community.

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).

While in Russian custody, some of the seized religious leaders were subjected to torture. 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.

Zaporizhzhia Region: Pressure to back community affiliation change

Russian occupation forces try to pressure religious leaders to change their affiliation to communities based in Russia and which support Russia's war against Ukraine.

Russian occupation officials tried to pressure Imam Rustem Asanov, a Crimean Tatar, of the Birlik (Unity) Mosque in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region. While they held and tortured him in March 2022, a man Imam Asanov suspects was from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) insisted that he cut the community's ties to the Muslim Spiritual Administration in Kyiv (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) and subjugate his mosque community to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea in the occupied Ukrainian city of Simferopol.

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Vladimir Saviisky was priest of St Nicholas Church in Primorsk, a town on the Azov Sea in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region which Russian occupation forces seized in late February 2022. He complained that they came into his church with automatic weapons and interrupted services, and on another occasion up to eight armed military personnel in balaclavas searched the yard, his home and the basement.

Fr Vladimir said the Russian occupation forces did not torture him. "Although they themselves admitted to me that in Kherson, they shaved the heads of priests and handcuffed them to their beds for five or six days."

Throughout 2022, Fr Vladimir continued to lead prayers in church for Ukraine, he told Current Time (<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/32483758.html>) for a 4 July 2023 feature. On 31 December 2022, as Fr Vladimir was at his church ready to start a prayer service for Ukraine, Russian occupation officials prevented him from doing so.

"Armed men pulled me out from behind the altar and forced me to take off my vestments," Fr Vladimir told Current Time. "The interrogation lasted five hours. They stripped me to the waist, they looked for tattoos - a trident or some kind of Ukrainian symbol. They searched my house, took away the computer, and took away the phones. This was my first arrest."

Russian occupation officials asked Fr Vladimir why he did not cooperate with them. During further arrests, "they said they wanted to know what opinions people have and what they confess. Of course I refused to do that, I didn't write denunciations .. They wanted me to write who came and what they wanted."

Fr Vladimir said parish life became more difficult in 2023. Russian occupation forces pressured him to join calls in April 2023 for the transfer of the Berdyansk Diocese from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) to come directly under the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russian occupation officials "arrived in Primorsk District, gathered the priests and, in the presence of FSB representatives, read out a very shameful, very vile letter. It said that people were happy that the Russian army had arrived. I spoke out categorically against it, saying that this was a betrayal not only of the Church, but also of the Motherland. I refused to sign."

The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church approved the transfer of the Diocese on 16 May. This meant Fr Vladimir and other clergy should no longer commemorate in the liturgy the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky).

Russian occupation forces "banned us from serving in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)," Fr Vladimir told Current Time. "They told us: 'Commemorate only the patriarch [Kirill] and the new bishop whom Moscow sent, cooperate with the authorities -

and everything will be fine with you, manna will fall from heaven.' They asked us to tell the people in the church to stop resisting and start thinking differently."

Fr Vladimir complained of constant pressure. "The seventh time such an 'interrogation' occurred was when I refused to sign a petition to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church."

Later in May, Russian soldiers came to Fr Vladimir's home at 11 pm, telling him: "Take off your cross and cassock." Fr Vladimir refused. "They drove me around the city, demanding that I accept this decision of the Moscow Synod that the Berdyansk Diocese had now transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church. I said that I remain a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), I am a Ukrainian priest. I have a Metropolitan in Kyiv - His Beatitude Onufry."

After people warned Fr Vladimir that he faced being stripped of his priestly office and then jailed for his pro-Ukrainian views, he reluctantly decided to flee to Ukrainian government-controlled territory. He left Primorsk on 1 June, driving through Russia before being able to cross the border into Estonia on the second attempt.

Forum 18 could not find out why the Russian occupation authorities are trying to pressure religious leaders to change their affiliation. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called between 17 and 24 October.

Zaporizhzhia Region: Russian military raid Baptist youth camp, Baptist church

On 18 August, Russian military raided a Council of Churches Baptist youth camp in the village of Rainivka close to the Black Sea coast in Zaporizhzhia Region. The camp – which was scheduled to last from 16 to 19 August – was for young people from the areas of Ukraine under Russian occupation. It was held in the garden of a house local Baptists bought in the late 1990s and renovated as a church building.

"Without identifying themselves, they checked identity documents of everyone present, inspected the site, and questioned the church members in charge and the home owner," church leaders in nearby Melitopol noted on 26 August.

Russian police returned on 21 August to question the home owner. They photographed the ownership documents for the house.

A local administration official and a soldier arrived on 24 August to tell the home owner that they intended to base Russian soldiers in the house.

Meanwhile, on 8 October, armed and masked men in military uniform raided the Sunday meeting for worship of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Melitopol, which has close ties with the Rainivka congregation. Several men in civilian clothes accompanied the armed men, bringing the total number of raiders to about 20.

"Soldiers in masks entered the hall and, without identifying themselves, ordered everyone to leave the building, and then began inspecting the house," church leaders noted on 21 October. They inspected all the rooms, including in cupboards. They seized several CDs, two video surveillance recordings, and one copy of each piece of literature.

"They checked church members' documents and their telephones, and inspected cars," church members added. "They photographed everyone who remained and started to summon some for interrogation." Those summoned for interrogation included the three owners of the church building, Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, Maksim Porokhnya and Vera Pashko. Officials seized their telephones.

After examining the house ownership documents, officials told them that they were in order. They then asked why the church is not registered with the Russian occupation authorities. Pastor Malakhov responded that the church is a member of the Council of Churches, where a church assembly takes any decision on registration, while the law allows religious communities the right to hold meetings without registration. Officials then asked about links with acquaintances and fellow-believers in government-held areas of Ukraine.

The officials also asked how the church collects money and on what money the church was built in the village of Rainivka where meetings for worship and summer camps are held.

Officials asked Pastor Malakhov many other questions, including when he joined the church, when he became its pastor, who else preaches to the congregation and where the church gets copies of the Baptist newspaper "Do you believe?" Officials told him they were preparing a record of an offence and said this would be handed to the Prosecutor's Office.

The Russian soldiers then took Pastor Malakhov back to his home, where they seized two computers for inspection. They warned him the police would summon him and he would then face a court and a fine of 10,000 Russian Roubles. They added that until they get Russian registration, the church cannot meet.

Forum 18 could not find out why the Russian occupation authorities raided the Baptist churches in Rainivka and Melitopol, and why they threatened the pastor in Melitopol with prosecution and banned the church from meeting for worship. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called between 17 and 24 October.

The man who answered the phone at a Russian military centre in Melitopol on 24 October – who did not give his name – denied to Forum 18 that any soldiers of the Russian army had taken part in the 18 August or 8 October raids on the Baptist communities. He then put the phone down.

The telephone at the Russian Melitopol city police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 24 October.

The woman who answered the phone on 24 October at the Russian Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office in Melitopol – who did not give her name – refused to put Forum 18 through to any prosecutor who might be handling any case against Pastor Malakhov. She also refused to give any phone number for Melitopol city Prosecutor's Office, saying they have only personal telephones.

Zaporizhzhia Region: Russian occupation forces seize Melitopol's Baptist Union church

On 23 October, Russian occupation forces seized the Central Baptist Church in Melitopol, a congregation of the Baptist Union. "The church held its Sunday worship service on 22 October. But officials came on Monday and told them that until the church is registered under Russian law it cannot function," Baptists told Forum 18 the following day. "They closed and sealed the church." This was the last Baptist Union church in the city which was able to hold meetings for worship.

"The officials were very polite and tried to act 'correctly'," Baptists added. They said Russian occupation officials had warned the Church earlier that it would not be allowed to function unless it gained Russian registration.

Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department insisted to Forum 18 on 12 October (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866) that only "law-abiding" religious communities are allowed to exist in the parts of the Ukrainian region the occupiers control.

Russian occupation forces have seized numerous places of worship from a variety of religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866), in Zaporizhzhia Region and other parts of Russian-occupied Ukraine. Among the churches closed in Melitopol was Grace Baptist Church, on the facade of which the occupation forces then hung portraits of Russian soldiers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2832).

Since the illegal imposition of Russian law on occupied Ukrainian territory (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) in October 2022, Russian officials insist that religious communities must register under Russian law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866) to continue to be allowed to exist. However, Russian tax authorities have registered only eight religious communities in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region, the Russian Orthodox Berdyansk Diocese, six parishes of the Russian Orthodox Diocese, and a Protestant church. (END)

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