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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Disappeared" Greek Catholic priests in Russian Investigation Prisons?

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

One of two Greek Catholic priests Russian occupation forces seized in November 2022 in the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk appears to have been transferred illegally to Russia. Fr Ivan Levytsky is being held in Russia's Rostov Region, Evhen Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group told Forum 18. Fr Bohdan Heleta is being held in Russian-occupied Crimea. Both priests appear to face Russian criminal charges related to weapons and explosives occupation forces claim they found. Relatives and the Church have been denied contact with the priests since November 2022.

One of the two Greek Catholic priests seized by Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian city of Berdyansk in November 2022 appears to have been transferred illegally to Russia. Fr Ivan Levytsky is being held in an Investigation Prison in Russia's Rostov Region, Evhen Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group told Forum 18. Fr Bohdan Heleta is being held in an Investigation Prison in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea.

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church says that it can confirm only that the two priests are in Russian captivity. "The exact location is not known - there is different information, but it is unconfirmed," the Exarchate told Forum 18. "The fathers are constantly included in the exchange lists [for prisoners held by Russia and Ukraine], but so far without results" (see below).

Both priests appear to be under investigation on Russian criminal charges related to weapons and explosives the Russian occupation forces claim to have found in Berdyansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan serve, when occupation forces seized the priests in November 2022. The claims were also broadcast on Russian occupation media channels, along with claims that allegedly "extremist" literature had been found in the Church. The Donetsk Exarchate has strongly denied all the Russian occupation forces' claims (see below).

"No trials [of the priests] have yet taken place," Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group told Forum 18 on 29 January 2024 (see below).

Relatives, friends and the Donetsk Exarchate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church - to which Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan belong - have had no contact with the priests since the Russian occupation forces disappeared them in November 2022 (see below).

Officials have refused to tell Forum 18 where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan are being held. Officials of Investigation Prisons Nos. 1, 3, 4 and 5 in Rostov Region told Forum 18 that they do not hold Fr Ivan. Officials of the other Investigation Prison in Rostov Region and the three Investigation Prisons in Simferopol in Crimea refused to say if they are holding either priest (see below).

The court for the district of Simferopol where the city's two Investigation Prisons are located told Forum 18 that it has not heard any requests to hold Fr Bohdan in pre-trial detention. Investigators need court orders to have individuals held in pre-trial detention. Investigators can submit them not only to the court where the individual is held but also to the court where the investigator is based (see below).

Officials have refused to tell Forum 18 the exact charges or Russian Criminal Code Articles the two priests are being investigated under. Nor would they say which Russian agency is conducting any investigation (see below).

The Russian Investigative Committee in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region told Forum 18 that it is not investigating any cases against the priests. The Investigative Committee in Rostov Region said it was unable to say if any investigators in the Region are investigating a case against Fr Ivan. The Investigative Committee in Crimea said it was unable to say if any investigators in the Region are investigating a case against Fr Bohdan (see below).

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church told Forum 18 that "all our priests have left" Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk and Luhansk Regions (see below).

Meanwhile, armed men in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region raided the Sunday morning worship service on 28 January of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne]. The head of the Russian-controlled Krasnodon police put the phone down when Forum 18 asked him about the raid (see below).

On 8 November 2023, three UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the Russian authorities expressing their "serious concern for the alleged enforced disappearances and torture or ill-treatment of clergy in the occupied territories in violation of international human rights law", and other freedom of religion or belief violations. Russia replied on 21 November that "all requests made in a manner offensive to the authorities and population of the Russian Federation, using language that is inconsistent with the principle of respect for the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the territorial integrity of Russia, will be left unanswered" (see below).

In January, the Russian authorities registered under Russian law two Pentecostal churches in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region. This is the first time since the March 2014 creation by Russian-backed forces of the Russian-controlled Luhansk People's Republic that any Protestant communities have been allowed to register. Communities of a variety of faiths – including other Protestants, Greek Catholics, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Jehovah's Witnesses (who have been banned in Russia since 2017) – have no possibility for any open existence (see below).

Religious leaders held for days, weeks, months

Russian occupation forces have seized religious leaders (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2886) of a variety of faiths since their renewed invasion of Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) from February 2022.

On 8 November 2023, the three UN Special Rapporteurs on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, on minority issues, and on freedom of religion or belief wrote to the Russian authorities (AL RUS 25/2023 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28563>)) expressing their "serious concern for the alleged enforced disappearances and torture or ill-treatment of clergy in the occupied territories in violation of international human rights law", and other freedom of religion or belief violations.

The Russian authorities refused to answer the three Special Rapporteurs, stating on 21 November 2023 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=37833>) that "all requests made in a manner offensive to the authorities and population of the Russian Federation, using language that is inconsistent with the principle of respect for the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the territorial integrity of Russia, will be left unanswered".

Such human rights violations continue. Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov was disappeared in May 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867). Russian occupation forces have refused to give any information about where he is being held (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882), or if he is still alive.

It remains unclear in many of the cases whether the seizure of religious leaders was intended 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2779) to 21 October 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

While in Russian custody, some of the seized religious leaders were tortured. These include in March 2022 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. Russian occupation forces forced the mosque to close (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

Russian occupation forces continue to close churches, mosques, and other places of worship in occupied Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878), and in other parts of Ukraine illegally occupied by Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866).

On 22 November 2022, the Russian military seized 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 2022, their shot and mutilated bodies were found (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) in a nearby wood. Russian occupation forces refused to answer Forum 18's questions about the torture and killing of the two men.

Asanov was among many religious leaders pressured by Russian officials while in custody to change their and their community's affiliation. Russian officials want religious communities in occupied territories to cut any ties to Ukraine-based headquarter bodies and to affiliate with Russia-based headquarter bodies.

Russian officials target priests and communities of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (recognised as canonical by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 2019) to pressure them to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878). They also pressure priests and communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which is affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchate) to recognise the jurisdiction of dioceses which come directly under the Moscow Patriarchate.

"Disappeared" in November 2022

Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized two Greek Catholic priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta - in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian city of Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhya Region in November 2022. Both priests are members of the Redemptorist congregation.

Relatives, friends and the Donetsk Exarchate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church - to which Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan belong - have had no contact with the priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882) since the Russian occupation authorities disappeared them in November 2022.

The head of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, called for the release of all Christian clergy "disappeared" by the Russian occupation forces. "We ask that international human rights organisations try to obtain the release of clergy of the Ukrainian Churches who have been imprisoned with no reason," he told a broadcast on the Church-run channel Zhyve TV on 28 January.

Archbishop Shevchuk also called for the release of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan. "We demand the release, the search for and freedom of our courageous Redemptorist fathers who are in Russian captivity."

Held in Rostov Region and Crimea, awaiting criminal trial?

One of the two priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky, appears to have been transferred illegally to Russia and is being held in an Investigation Prison in Russia's Rostov Region, Evhen Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group told Forum 18 on 29 January. Fr Bohdan Heleta is being held in an Investigation Prison in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea, Zakharov added.

The Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf) (described as "protected persons"). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein." Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church says that they can only confirm only that the two priests are in Russian captivity. "The exact location is not known - there is different information, but it is unconfirmed," the Exarchate told Forum 18 on 1 February. "The fathers are constantly included in the exchange lists [for prisoners held by Russia and Ukraine], but so far without results."

Both priests appear to be under investigation on Russian criminal charges related to weapons and explosives the Russian occupation forces claim to have found (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) in Berdyansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan serve, when occupation forces seized the priests in November 2022. The claims were also broadcast on Russian occupation media channels, along with claims that allegedly "extremist" literature had been found in the Church. The Donetsk Exarchate has strongly denied all the Russian occupation forces' claims.

Among the allegedly "extremist" texts (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) was a collection of sermons by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944. 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.

"No trials [of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan] have yet taken place," Zakharov of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group told Forum 18 on 29 January 2024.

Various Russian officials between 29 January and 2 February refused to tell Forum 18 where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan are being held. Officials of Investigation Prisons Nos. 1, 3, 4 and 5 in Rostov Region told Forum 18 that they do not hold Fr Ivan. Officials of the other Investigation Prison in Rostov Region and the three Investigation Prisons in Simferopol in Crimea refused to say if they are holding either priest.

Under Russian law, investigators need court orders to have individuals held in pre-trial detention. Investigators can submit requests

not only to the court where the individual is held but also to the court where the investigator is based. Investigators generally need to renew these court orders every one or two months, with a maximum period of pre-trial detention normally of 12 months for "serious or especially serious crimes" or 18 months for such crimes "in exceptional circumstances".

The court for the Zheleznodorozhny District of Simferopol where the city's two Investigation Prisons are located told Forum 18 that it has not heard any requests to hold Fr Bohdan in pre-trial detention. "Find out from the Investigator which court ordered his detention," the official told Forum 18 on 1 February.

Officials have refused to tell Forum 18 the exact charges or Russian Criminal Code Articles the two priests are being investigated under. Nor would they say which Russian agency is conducting any investigation.

The Russian Investigative Committee in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region told Forum 18 on 30 January that it is not investigating any cases against the priests. The Investigative Committee in Rostov Region told Forum 18 on 30 January it was unable to say if any investigators in the Region are investigating a case against Fr Ivan. The Investigative Committee in Crimea told Forum 18 on 2 February it was unable to say if any investigators in the Region are investigating a case against Fr Bohdan.

"All our priests have left"

The raid on and closure of the Greek Catholic Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Church in Berdyansk in November 2022 and the seizure of Fr Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Heleta ended organised Greek Catholic life in the city.

The Greek Catholic Church was one of four religious communities the Russian-installed governor of the part of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region under Russian occupation banned in December 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882). The others were Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Protestant Church. Yevgeny Balitsky accused these Churches of links with foreign "special services" and ordered all their property seized.

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church told Forum 18 on 1 February 2024 that in late 2023, a military truck came to their Berdyansk church and took away items. Several weeks later, a man dressed in priest's clothes came to the church and took down the sign outside indicating that the building is a Greek Catholic church.

"All our priests have left" Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, the Donetsk Exarchate added.

"Unable to say" when two Orthodox priests will return to Donetsk

Two priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui, remain in a Deportation Centre for foreigners in the village of Sinyavskoe just outside the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don.

The two were fined and ordered deported (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869) in September 2023 for violating Russian law on missionary activity in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. They were then illegally transferred to Russia.

Aleksandr Nikolenko, who is handling the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, told Forum 18 on 18 January 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2886) that Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri are Ukrainian citizens. He claimed that they do not want to leave the Russian Federation. Asked if he means that they want to return to their homes in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, he responded: "They want to live in Donetsk."

Nikolenko said neither priest is willing to accept Russian citizenship. "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk, but they can't do so as citizens of another state," he insisted.

Nikolenko told Forum 18 on 2 February that there has been no change to the priests' situation. Asked when the two priests will return to Donetsk, he responded: "I'm unable to say."

Foreigners' detention centre address:

346859 Rostovskaya oblast

Neklinovsky raion

s. Sinyavskoe

Tsentr vremennogo soderzhaniya inostrannikh grazhdan

Armed men raid Sunday worship meeting

Armed men in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) raided the Sunday morning worship service on 28 January of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne]. "They took out two of the elders, Vyacheslav Kollisnichenko and Mikhail Miknus," local Baptists noted on Telegram the same day. "They're recording everything on camera! They're letting no one out. They're writing down the passport details of all those present."

The congregation – like other Council of Baptist churches – does not seek permission from the authorities to meet. Its place of worship is in a private home.

The armed men then released the two elders and allowed the meeting for worship to finish. They then took the home owner Yuliya Vitsenovskaya in a police car to the police station. Officials questioned Miknus and another church leader Oleg Vorotilin in the church room. All were allowed to go later in the day. Officials later told church members to bring documents on ownership of the home on 30 January.

Colonel Sergei Krupa, head of the Russian Krasnodon police, put the phone down on 30 January when Forum 18 asked why armed men had raided the Baptist church. The duty officer at Krasnodon police refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions the same day.

After a June 2018 police raid on the congregation's Sunday worship, Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – was fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401), and he was fined again in June 2019 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539). Following an August 2019 police raid on Sunday worship Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko was fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). Pastor Rytikov was in January 2020 threatened with criminal charges of "extremism" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539) for refusing to stop leading his congregation.

Luhansk Region: Two Pentecostal churches registered, but other Protestants illegal

In 2024, Russia is following a more coordinated approach (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) to impose the full range of Russian restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief across all the Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>).

Russian occupation officials now insist that Russian law applies to the occupied territories (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808), and that religious communities must have registration under Russian law.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned "the unlawful application of Russian Federation legislation by the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation in the occupied territory [Crimea]" in its Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine for 1 August 2020 to 31 January 2021 (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/31stReportUkraine-en.pdf>).

Only on 22 January 2024 did the occupation authorities allow two Protestant Churches in Luhansk Region (both of them Pentecostal congregations) to gain Russian state registration, according to Russian tax records. No Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist or other Protestant communities have Russian state registration there.

Among other communities that do not have registered communities in Russian-controlled parts of Luhansk Region – and thus have no legal right to meet for worship - are Greek Catholics, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Jehovah's Witnesses (who have been banned in Russia since 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297)).

Before Russia claimed to annex Luhansk Region in September 2022, the Russian-backed Luhansk People's Republic refused to register any Protestant communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721). Those that met without registration (like the Krasnodon Council of Baptists congregation) faced raids, fines and seizures of their places of worship. (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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