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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Protestant woman on trial for Melitopol prayer meeting?

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

In early 2024, Russian occupation forces arrested a Protestant in her fifties for participating in a July 2023 prayer meeting in the occupied Ukrainian city of Melitopol. Prosecutors handed her criminal case to Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court. In the same court is the criminal case against Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest Kostiantyn Maksimov for alleged "espionage". On 27 April, Krasnodon's Russian-controlled court fined Pastor Vladimir Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles on charges of "illegal missionary activity" for leading his unregistered Baptist congregation. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted.

A Protestant in her early fifties has been under arrest by Russian occupation forces since early 2024, and may already be facing criminal trial at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court in occupied Ukraine. She is being prosecuted for remarks she allegedly made at a prayer meeting in a home in the occupied city of Melitopol in July 2023.

With information from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the occupation forces' Investigative Committee launched a criminal case on charges of giving "knowingly false information" about the Russian armed forces. She faces up to 10 years in jail if convicted (see below).

The Russian Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee – which did not name the woman – claimed that she was "the leader of a religious organisation banned in Zaporizhzhia Region". However, Forum 18 understands that the woman was an ordinary church member, not a leader (see below).

The occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee refused to say whether the FSB had secretly recorded the religious meeting at which the woman is alleged to have made her remarks. An official told Forum 18 from Melitopol that the case had been handed to the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court and that all questions should be addressed to the Court. The Court's telephone was not answered each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Also, Russian prosecutors handed a criminal case against 41-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov to Zaporizhzhia Regional Court, the Russian Prosecutor's Office announced on 29 March. Fr Kostiantyn is being tried under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code (see below).

The occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Regional Court did not respond to Forum 18's questions as to whether Fr Kostiantyn was on trial and, if the case had already concluded, what the verdict was. Several of the Court's judges told Forum 18 that they were not involved in the case (see below).

Artyom Sharlay, the then 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 when Forum 18 called (see below).

On 27 April, the Russian-controlled Krasnodon Town Court in Luhansk Region fined Pastor Vladimir Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles on charges of "illegal missionary activity" for leading his unregistered Baptist congregation. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted. More than 30 church members came to the court to support their pastor. Pastor Rytikov has lodged an appeal to the Russian-controlled Luhansk Supreme Court, local Baptists told Forum 18 (see below).

The head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergei Krupa – who had signed the order to hand the case to court - refused to explain why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home (see below).

On 19 April, the Russian FSB in the occupied Luhansk Region claimed to have arrested more than one Jehovah's Witness. The FSB said a criminal case has been opened against them on charges of "public calls for the carrying out of extremist activity". Jehovah's Witnesses described the report to Forum 18 as "false". Russian occupation authorities often make claims about their actions against individuals and communities which cannot be verified (see below).

The Russian Orthodox diocese of Skadovsk – which the Moscow Patriarchate unilaterally established in Russian-occupied parts of Kherson Region in December 2023 – has taken over a Ukrainian Greek Catholic church in the village of Oleksandrivka. On 28 April, it was consecrated as a Russian Orthodox church. The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, called the seizure and reconsecration of the church "sacrilege" (see below).

In late 2022, the Russian occupation forces in Zaporizhzhia Region pressured at least one priest to abandon the Greek Catholic Church and join the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. He refused. "He was offered either to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and stay, or to leave. He decided to leave," fellow Greek Catholic priest Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz recalled. He too was forced to leave Russian-occupied territory (see below).

Russian occupation authorities have also repeatedly tried to pressure priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) to join new dioceses the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church has unilaterally established on occupied Ukrainian territory. Both OCU and UOC clergy have been disappeared and tortured after they have refused. Muslim clergy and mosques have also been pressured and tortured if they refuse to join Russian-controlled Islamic structures (see below).

In spring 2024, border officials at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport denied entry to a Ukrainian religious leader who had left soon after the Russian invasion in February 2022 and was intending to return to Russian-occupied Ukraine to visit the remaining community. "Border officials quoted to me the article which says that the Russian Federation has the right not to allow in other citizens if they are a threat to national security and the territorial integrity of the country," the religious leader told Forum 18 (see below).

Illegal imposition of Russian law

It is illegal under international law for Russia to enforce its own laws on occupied Ukrainian territory, as Russia is required to leave Ukrainian law in force (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-64/commentary/1958?activeTab=undefined>).

The Russian-occupied or partially-occupied regions of Ukraine – including Zaporizhzhia which Russia illegally claimed to have annexed (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492>) in 2022 – began imposing punishments under Russia's Criminal and Administrative Codes in late 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) in courts which Russia controls.

Melitopol: Protestant woman faces trial for prayer meeting participation

A group of Protestants met for prayer on Sunday 23 July 2023 in a home in the city of Melitopol in the part of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region occupied by Russian forces. One of those present was a woman aged about 50. "Acting on motives of political hatred, she gave false information about the activity of the Russian armed forces," the Russian Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee claimed on 12 February 2024.

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) continued to be involved in the case, and handed information about the July 2023 prayer meeting to occupation force prosecutors and the occupiers' Investigative Committee.

A criminal case was launched against the woman under Russian Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2, Paragraph D. This punishes "Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" when conducted "for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity against any social group". Punishments range from a large fine to up to 10 years' imprisonment.

The occupiers' Investigative Committee – which did not name the woman - claimed she was "the leader of a religious organisation banned in Zaporizhzhia Region". However, Forum 18 understands that the woman was an ordinary church member, not a leader.

Occupation forces repeatedly forcibly close Ukrainian religious communities

Russian occupation forces have repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

Among other examples, Russian-imposed Governor Yevgeny Balitsky banned four religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882) in Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia Region in December 2022: the Greek Catholic Church, Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Protestant Church. (The buildings of Grace, Melitopol Christian, and Word of Life churches had been seized in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784)). Occupation Governor Balitsky accused these Churches of links with foreign "special services" and ordered all their property seized.

A February 2024 meeting of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, chaired by Russian-imposed Governor Balitsky, praised the "halting of the work of religious sects which had taken part in organising mass disorder and anti-Russian activity", the governor's website noted on 26 February (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902).

Russian occupation officials treat all Ukrainian religious communities which have not received Russian state registration as illegal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890).

Melitopol: Case handed to court

The Russian Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee announced on 11 March that its First Department for Investigating Especially Important Cases had completed its investigation of the criminal case against the Protestant woman from Melitopol. It said the case against her has been handed to court, without identifying which court.

"In the course of the investigation the accused woman actively cooperated with the investigation and fully recognised her guilt in committing the crime," the Russian Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee claimed. "At the request of the investigator", it added, the court ordered the woman held in pre-trial detention.

The court appears to have ordered the woman's detention sometime between the 12 February and 11 March Investigative Committee announcements. It did not say where she was being held, nor when her trial began or is due to begin.

The Russian duty officer at the occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee refused to say whether Russia's FSB had secretly recorded the religious meeting at which the woman is alleged to have made her remarks. He told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 8 May that the case had been handed to the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court and that all questions should be addressed to the court.

Telephones at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court were not answered each time Forum 18 called on 8 May. (9 and 10 May are Russian public holidays.)

Orthodox priest also on trial at Zaporizhzhia Regional Court?

Prosecutors handed a criminal case against Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Vyacheslavovich Maksimov (born 16 March 1983) to Zaporizhzhia Regional Court in the occupied city of Melitopol, the Russian Prosecutor's Office announced on 29 March. Fr Kostiantyn is being tried under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code.

Forum 18 wrote to the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court on the afternoon of 8 May asking whether Fr Kostiantyn was on trial and, if the case had already concluded, what the verdict was. Forum 18 received no immediate reply. (9 and 10 May are Russian public holidays.)

Vladimir Polukhin, the Russian-installed head of the court, did not respond to Forum 18's message about the trial of Fr Kostiantyn sent to his personal email address on 8 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902).

Two Judges at the court, Nikita Vdovin and Roman Doroshenko, told Forum 18 separately on 8 May that they were not the judge in Fr Kostiantyn's case. Asked the same day if he was the Judge in the case, Yevgeny Zadkov responded: "Get lost."

An official of the Russian Regional Prosecutor's Office – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 8 May that he had no information on whether the trial of Fr Kostiantyn had begun.

Fr Kostiantyn served as priest of the UOC's Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the city of Tokmak in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. Russian occupation forces detained him in the southern town of Chongar (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) when he attempted to cross the administrative boundary with the occupied Ukrainian territory of Crimea in May 2023.

Fr Kostiantyn's whereabouts have been uncertain since occupation forces seized him. Yelena Shapovalova, the head of the Bar Association in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region, told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 8 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) that Fr Kostiantyn had been held at the temporary holding centre in Melitopol while the pre-trial investigation was underway. She declined to say where he was after that.

Artyom Sharlay, the then head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, claimed to Forum 18 in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) that Fr Kostiantyn had not wanted the Berdyansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to move to be an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the Diocese in May 2023.

Sharlay - now the head of the Department for Work with Ethnic, Religious and Cossack Organisations of the Social and Political Communications Department of the Internal Policy Department of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration - did not answer his phone on 8 May 2024.

Luhansk Baptist pastor fined for illegal "missionary" activity

On 28 January, armed men raided the Sunday morning worship service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890) of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. Officials took two elders out of the service for questioning, and filmed and took passport details of all those present.

The church's Pastor, Vladimir Rytikov, was not present during the 28 January meeting for worship.

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. Pastor Rytikov and the Krasnodon Baptist congregation have faced repeated pressure from Russian occupation forces in recent years, including raids, fines and a threat of criminal prosecution.

The armed men then released the two elders and allowed the meeting for worship to finish. They then took the home owner in a police car to the police station. 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.

On 2 February, police came to Pastor Rytikov's home. They asked if he led the church and why it functions without registration. They also asked to see the church's statute. "I told them that our statute is the Gospel," Pastor Rytikov noted on 7 February (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903). He told the officers that the church does not wish to seek registration. He refused to answer questions about other church members, insisting that he could speak only for himself.

On 25 March, police in Krasnodon telephoned Pastor Rytikov to summon him to the police station. "They said this was to draw up a record of an offence to be handed to court," Baptist Telegram channels quoted Pastor Rytikov as declaring. "They said that the church is banned in Luhansk." He added that when they asked if he was going to go to the police station, he told them he would not.

On 29 March, Russian-controlled Krasnodon Police officer Sergei Vakhny prepared the record of an offence against Pastor Rytikov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) (seen by Forum 18). The record of an offence notes that he was found leading a religious meeting at 12 noon on 28 January (though he was not present). Police illegally accused him of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) ("Russians conducting missionary activity"), which carries a punishment for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

"Rytikov was informed in the proper manner but did not appear for the drawing up of the record of an administrative offence," Vakhny noted. He noted that Rytikov is not on the wanted list and has no current convictions in the Russian Interior Ministry's integrated database.

Also on 29 March, the head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergei Krupa, signed the order (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) (seen by Forum 18) to hand the case to Krasnodon Town Court.

Occupation police Colonel Krupa refused to explain why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home. "I won't give any comments by phone," he told Forum 18 on 5 April (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903), and then put the phone down.

On the morning of 27 April, Judge Tatyana Bagayeva of Krasnodon Town Court found Pastor Rytikov guilty. She fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles. "This is half my [monthly] pension," Pastor Rytikov noted the same day. More than 30 church members came to the court to support their pastor, greeting him with flowers.

Pastor Rytikov received the written decision on 2 May and lodged an appeal to Luhansk Supreme Court, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 6 May.

Krasnodon's Council of Churches Baptist congregation has met in the same location since 1961, and has come under repeated pressure (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) after the Russian occupation began in 2014. The Church has been led for some years by Pastor Rytikov, who is a former prisoner of conscience (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) jailed by the Soviet authorities from 1979 to 1982 to punish his involvement in a Christian children's summer camp.

FSB claims to have arrested Jehovah's Witnesses

On 19 April, Russia's Federal Security (FSB) in the occupied Luhansk Region

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) claimed to have arrested more than one Jehovah's Witness, Russian news agency Tass cited FSB officials as declaring. It said a criminal case has been opened against them on charges of "public calls for the carrying out of extremist activity".

Russian Criminal Code Article 280 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) punishes "Public calls for extremist activity" with a maximum punishment of 5 years' imprisonment.

The Luhansk Region FSB said the members of the "cell" had "held monetary collections for the funds of the sect and prepared and distributed leaflets of extremist content".

After the Russian occupation of Luhansk Region began in 2014, in May 2021 Jehovah's Witness and Protestant texts (including a translation of the Gospel of John) were added to a State List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721).

"We are happy to inform you that this [FSB] information from Luhansk is false," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 9 May.

Russian occupation authorities often make claims about their actions against individuals and communities which cannot be verified.

Russian Orthodox seize Greek Catholic church

The Russian Orthodox diocese of Skadovsk – which the Moscow Patriarchate unilaterally established in Russian-occupied parts of Kherson Region in December 2023 – has taken over a Ukrainian Greek Catholic church in the village of Oleksandrivka.

On 28 April, the dean of Skadovsk District Archpriest Nikolai Kanyuka conducted the consecration of the church as a Russian Orthodox church. "Previously, the church .. was Greek Catholic," the diocese noted on its website the following day. "By decision of the local community and after an appeal to the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, the parish, together with the building, came under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate."

In a sermon on 2 May, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, called the seizure and reconsecration of the church "sacrilege", pointing out that it took place as both Churches were marking Holy Week.

Archbishop Shevchuk also mentioned the two imprisoned Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta from Berdyansk, who have been in Russian captivity since November 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793). "Today they endure in Christ and with Christ. They are now truly following Christ to the cross. Today we are asking, praying and working - doing everything possible to release them."

Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan appear to be facing criminal trial (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890), under false charges related to weapons, explosives, and allegedly "extremist" texts the Russian occupation forces claim to have found in Berdyansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793).

The Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate, to which Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan belong, told Forum 18 on 9 May that it has had no recent news of the priests.

Occupiers pressured Greek Catholic priest to join Russian Orthodox

Russian occupation forces in Zaporizhzhia Region not only banned the Greek Catholic Church in the occupied parts of the Region in December 2022 (see above), they also drove out the five Greek Catholic priests who were serving in the 10 or so parishes in and around Melitopol.

In November 2022, Russian occupation forces detained Fr Peter Krenický (parish priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Assumption of Saint Anna Church in Melitopol) and then forced him to leave. In December the occupation forces then detained Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz, priest of the city's Greek catholic Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church, and also forced him to leave (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799).

Occupation forces have also pressured at least one Greek Catholic priest to join the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. The married priest, Fr Leonid Bizunov in the village of Orlove north of Melitopol, refused.

Fr Oleksandr told Iryna Fenno of the Religion in Fire project on 1 February 2024 (<https://www.mar.in.ua/en/i-cant-change-circumstances-or-situations-what-i-see-or-hear-but-i-can-be-there-for-you-father-oleksandr-bohomaz/>) that "regarding me, there was a specific decision on deportation". However, Fr Leonid "was offered either to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and stay, or to leave. He decided to leave. So he and his wife left on 8 December [2022]."

Russian occupation authorities have also repeatedly tried to pressure priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902)

of both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) to join new dioceses the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church has unilaterally established on occupied Ukrainian territory. Both OCU and UOC clergy have been disappeared after they have refused.

Occupation officials have also pressured and tortured Muslim clergy and pressured mosque communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) if they refuse to join Russian-controlled Islamic structures.

Religious leader denied entry to Russia to visit community in occupied Ukrainian territory

In spring 2024, Russian border officials at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport denied entry to a Ukrainian religious leader who was intending to return to Russian-occupied Ukraine to visit the remaining community. (Since October 2023, Sheremetyevo Airport has been one of only two points where the Russian authorities allow Ukrainian citizens to enter Russia from third countries.)

The religious leader – a Ukrainian citizen - had left Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory in early 2022, soon after the occupation began.

"Border officials quoted to me the article which says that the Russian Federation has the right not to allow in other citizens if they are a threat to national security and the territorial integrity of the country," the religious leader told Forum 18 on 7 May. The individual asked not to be identified. (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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