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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Orthodox priest's "espionage" verdict due 2 August

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

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Kostiantyn Maksimov faces up to 12 years in prison if convicted on Russian "espionage" charges. His trial began on 6 June, with the final presentation of arguments due on 31 July and the verdict on 2 August. Seized by occupation forces in May 2023, Fr Kostiantyn is in Investigation Prison No. 2 in the Crimean capital Simferopol. On 7 June, Russian FSB officers raided Fr Feognost Pushkov's home in occupied Luhansk Region with a court-ordered search. Officials questioned him on 11 June. He was summoned to be added to the military register.

The criminal trial of Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov on charges of "espionage" is due to resume with the final presentation of arguments on 31 July. The verdict is reportedly due to be handed down on 2 August. The trial began on 6 June, after the priest had spent more than a year in Russian detention. If convicted, the 41-year-old priest faces a prison term of 10 to 12 years.

It appears that the trial is taking place at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court in the occupied city of Melitopol. Officials will not say if the Judge is in Melitopol or holding the hearings in Russian-occupied Crimea. Officials refuse to identify the Judge (see below).

Seized by Russian occupation forces in May 2023, Fr Kostiantyn is known to have been held in Investigation Prison No. 2 in the Crimean capital Simferopol since at least February 2024. Zaporizhzhia Regional Court formally ordered his pre-trial detention on 18 April. It appears that he is participating in the trial via videolink from the Investigation Prison (see below).

Fr Kostiantyn is on trial under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code. 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 (see below).

If convicted and sentenced to a jail term, Fr Kostiantyn is likely to be transferred to a prison in Russia, despite this breaking the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (see below).

The occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office in Melitopol would not say by phone who is leading the prosecution case against Fr Kostiantyn in court. Nor has it responded to written questions (see below).

Russian occupation forces have a record of fabricating false charges against those they dislike.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' 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, claimed to Forum 18 in October 2023 that Fr Kostiantyn had not wanted the Berdyansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, to move to be an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the Diocese in May 2023 (see below).

A Protestant in her early fifties is also facing criminal trial at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court. The Russian occupation forces arrested her in early 2024. 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 (see below).

The Russian occupying forces disappeared two Greek Catholic priests - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta – in Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region in November 2022. Both priests now in 2024 appear to be facing criminal trial, 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 (see below).

Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan appear to be in detention in Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka (Gorlovka in Russian) in Ukraine's Russian-occupied Donetsk Region (see below).

Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka did not respond to Forum 18's questions as to – if it is holding the two priests – whether they can exercise freedom of religion or belief; whether they have access to lawyers; and what is preventing them being returned to their families (see below).

On 7 June, Russian FSB security service officers came to the home of Fr Feognost Pushkov of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in the village of Prosyanoie in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, with a search warrant issued by Russian-controlled Zhovtneve District Court in Luhansk. They searched his home, taking away two phones, two notebook computers and three USB sticks (see below).

It remains unclear if the FSB or other Russian state agency is conducting an investigation into Fr Feognost. Telephones at the court and at the Russian Luhansk Region Investigative Committee went unanswered each time Forum 18 called. Forum 18 was unable to reach Russia's FSB for Luhansk Region (see below).

Officials came again to Fr Feognost's home on 11 June and took him to the nearby town of Markivka for questioning. It appears that officials are conducting "expert analyses" of his publications. "I have no idea what the 'experts' will decide," Fr Feognost noted. Asked why officers had brought in Fr Feognost for questioning, the duty officer at Markivka District Police told Forum 18: "I don't have the right to give you such information" (see below).

On 18 June, Fr Feognost noted that officials had summoned him immediately to be included in the military register. They told him that everyone had to be included. "Otherwise they are threatened with 5 years [in prison]" (see below).

On 11 June, Luhansk Supreme Court upheld the fine of 5,000 Russian Roubles handed to Pastor Vladimir Rytikov in April for leading his unregistered Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne]. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted at the time (see below).

Russian occupiers' pressure on religious communities

Russian occupation authorities have repeatedly tried to pressure priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) of both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) affiliated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) linked to the Moscow Patriarchate 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.

Unknown men from the Russian occupation forces seized 59-year-old Fr Stepan Podolchak of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) on 13 February in the Ukrainian village of Kalanchak in the Russian-occupied part of Kherson Region. They took him away barefoot with a bag over his head, insisting he needed to come for questioning. His bruised body – possibly with a bullet-wound to the head - was found on the street in the village on 15 February. No one appears to have been arrested or punished for Fr Stepan's torture and murder (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2893).

Russian occupation forces in Zaporizhzhia Region not only banned four religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882) – including the Greek Catholic Church - in the occupied parts of the Region in December 2022, they also drove out the five Greek Catholic priests who were serving in the 10 or so parishes in and around Melitopol.

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

Occupation authorities have closed and seized many places of worship (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>) of communities they do not like.

Russian occupiers disappeared Fr Kostiantyn in May 2023

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Vyacheslavovich Maksimov (born 16 March 1983) 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. He chose to remain there when Russian forces occupied the area in early 2022.

Russian occupation forces detained Fr Kostiantyn 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.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' 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, 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) affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate to move to be an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the Diocese in May 2023.

Sharlay did not answer his phone between 17 and 19 June 2024.

After being initially held in Melitopol, Fr Kostiantyn was transferred to a Russian detention centre in occupied Donetsk Region. In or before February 2024, the Russian occupiers transferred him to Investigation Prison No. 2 in the Crimean capital Simferopol. Officially, the prison recorded his arrival as 16 April. On 18 April, the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court ordered him held in pre-trial detention. He remains there while his trial is underway.

Fr Kostiantyn is being held with two other prisoners in a cell designed for four, his mother Svetlana Maksimova told Forum 18. One of the other prisoners is a Ukrainian who has just been sentenced on "espionage" charges. A Russian-controlled court handed him a 13-year prison term. The prisoner expects to be transferred soon to a prison in southern Russia.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Investigation Prison No. 2 in Simferopol by phone in mid June.

Fr Kostiantyn's address in Investigation Prison:

295051 Respublika Krym

g. Simferopol

per. Elevatorny 4

FKU Sledstvenny izolyator No. 2 UFSIN Rossii po Respublike Krym i g. Sevastopolyu

Criminal case against Fr Kostiantyn

The Russian occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) against Fr Kostiantyn in February 2024. It claimed in a 29 March 2024 announcement that in Tokmak between April 2022 and February 2023, Fr Kostiantyn "using an Internet messenger, transmitted to an employee of the Ukrainian security service information with the coordinates of the deployment of Russian air defence technical equipment located in the city and district".

The Prosecutor's Office announcement gave no evidence for its claims and made no reference to Fr Kostiantyn's status as a priest.

"The accomplice of the Ukrainian special services was caught transferring confidential data to his overseers in Kyiv," local pro-Russian politician Vladimir Rogov claimed on his Telegram channel on 31 March 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902). "The information leak threatened the security of Russia and all residents of the Zaporizhzhia Region."

Russian occupation forces have a record of fabricating false charges against those they dislike.

Prosecutors prepared a case against Fr Kostiantyn under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code. They then handed the case to Zaporizhzhia Regional Court in the occupied city of Melitopol, the Russian Prosecutor's Office announced on 29 March (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902).

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 where Fr Kostiantyn 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) in courts which Russia controls.

The duty official at the Russian Investigative Committee for the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region, who did not give his name, refused to say on 18 June if its investigators had prepared the criminal case against Fr Kostiantyn. He referred all questions about the case to the Regional Court.

No exchange

Fr Kostiantyn's mother Svetlana Maksimova had hoped her son would be released as part of a prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia.

"We lodged documents for Kostiantyn to be included in a prisoner exchange," she told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) from Ukrainian government-held territory. "But the Ukrainian government considers him a 'lost person' because it has not been officially informed where he is." This means that Ukraine would not include him in a prisoner list to submit to the Russians, Maksimova explained.

The Ukrainian and Russian governments have held multiple prisoner exchanges since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, negotiations are often delicate and apparent agreements often break down at the last minute.

Trial to resume 31 July, verdict expected 2 August

The criminal trial of Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov on charges of "espionage" began on 6 June, Fr Kostiantyn's mother Svetlana Maksimova told Forum 18. The trial appears to be taking place at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court in the occupied city of Melitopol.

After the first hearing on 6 June, the trial was adjourned until a next hearing due on 31 July, with the final presentation of arguments [preniya], Maksimova added. She said the verdict is expected to be handed down on 2 August.

It appears that Fr Kostiantyn is participating in the trial via videolink from the Investigation Prison in Simferopol. Officials will not say if the Judge is in Melitopol or holding the hearings in Russian-occupied Crimea. Officials refuse to identify the Judge.

The official who answered the phone at the occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office – who did not give his name – refused to say who is the prosecutor at Fr Kostiantyn's trial. "This is secret information," he told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 18 June. Asked if the trial is open or closed, he responded: "Ask the court."

Fr Kostiantyn has a lawyer named by the Russians, but the family have been unable to find out her name. The family has also engaged a Kyiv-based lawyer Yuliya Bogdan.

Maksimova fears that her son could be handed an 11 or 12-year prison term. She pointed to the 13-year jail term handed to her son's cell mate, Ukrainian citizen Valery Yuzefovich, on similar "espionage" charges.

Maksimova wanted to be able to attend her son's trial. But the long journey through third countries, with no guarantee she would be allowed in, made such a journey unrealistic, she told Forum 18.

No one at the listed number for Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court answered the phone between 3 and 19 June. Forum 18 wrote to the court on 3 June (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) asking who would be the judge in the case. Forum 18 also asked whether Fr Kostiantyn would be present in the courtroom or whether he would participate by videolink from Investigation Prison No. 2 in Simferopol. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day locally of 19 June.

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908) 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."

"I am not the chair of the court, nor the press service," Judge Vdovin added on 17 June. "I'm not authorised to give anyone any information. Indeed, I don't have any."

If convicted and sentenced to a jail term, Fr Kostiantyn is likely to be illegally transferred to a prison in Russia.

The Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-protection-civilian-persons-time-war>) covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (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."

Protestant facing trial for remarks at prayer meeting?

A Protestant in her early fifties has been under arrest by Russian occupation forces since early 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908), and may already be facing criminal trial at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court. 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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908) 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 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 on 8 May from Melitopol (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908) that the case had been handed to the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court and that all questions should be addressed to the Court.

No one at the listed number for Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court answered the phone whenever Forum 18 called between 3 and 19 June.

Disappeared Greek Catholic priests in Horlivka camp?

The Russian occupying forces disappeared two Greek Catholic priests - Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta – in Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region in November 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793). The Russians appear to be holding the priests at Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka (Gorlovka in Russian) in Ukraine's Russian-occupied Donetsk Region.

Both priests now in 2024 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 official who answered the phone at the occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office – who did not give his name – refused to say if it is investigating any criminal case against Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan. "We won't give any information by telephone," he told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 18 June.

An official of Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka refused to discuss Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan. "I work only with staff, not with the special contingent [who work with prisoners]," she told Forum 18 from the labour camp on 18 June. She refused to give the telephone numbers of the camp head, Aleksei Chirva, or other staff. Other numbers Forum 18 called at the camp went unanswered.

On 3 June (resent on 18 June), Forum 18 wrote to Kalinin Labour Camp (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) asking (if Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan are indeed there):

- what conditions are like in the camp;
- whether they can exercise freedom of religion or belief, including by having religious literature and praying;
- whether they have access to lawyers;
- and what is preventing them being returned to their families.

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day locally of 19 June.

Russia's Ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova, together with the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk Darya Morozova, appear to have met the 47-year-old Fr Ivan and 59-year-old Fr Bohdan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) in early May in Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka. The Russians have held many prisoners of war and other detainees in the camp since their renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Forum 18 wrote to the offices of Moskalkova in Moscow and Morozova in Donetsk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) on 30 May asking whether they had met Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan in Russia's Kalinin Labour Camp in Horlivka or somewhere else, and what the two priests had said about conditions they face. Forum 18 had received no response from either by the end of the working day locally of 19 June.

The Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) decided to strip Russia's Ombudsperson's Office of accreditation in October 2023 over a range of concerns. Among these concerns was its support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. GANHRI's Sub-Committee on Accreditation added that Russia's Ombudsperson's Office "is not acting independently when considering human rights violations committed by Russian authorities, and is supporting positions and actions of the Russian authorities against international norms".

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church – to which Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan belong – told Forum 18 on 3 June (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912) that it has received no news of the two priests. It said it had no confirmation that Moskalkova had visited Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan.

However, the fact that Moskalkova talked about them appears to show that they are alive 18 months after they were seized and is a "good sign", Fr Andriy Bukhvak, chancellor of the Donetsk Exarchate, told Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2912).

The address of the Russian Labour Camp in Horlivka, where the Russians appear to be holding Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan:

Donetskaya narodnaya respublika

g. Gorlovka

ul. Nemirovicha-Danchenko d. 12

FKU IK-4 UFSIN Rossii po Donetskoy Narodnoi Respubliki

House search, investigation into Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest

The 44-year-old Fr Feognost (Timofei Pushkov) is a priest of the Luhansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate. He lives in the village of Prosyanoie in Ukraine's Luhansk Region, close to the border with Russia. He serves as a supernumerary priest at the parish of St Nikolai in the village of Kuryachivka in Starobilsk District, 25 kms (15 miles) from the border with Russia. Russian forces illegally occupied the area in early 2022.

Fr Feognost posts frequently on social media, with regular commentary on church matters.

In 2023, prosecutors brought charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833) against Fr Feognost 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"). The Russian FSB had disliked a video he had posted 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.

On 26 April 2023, prosecutors handed the case to the police, who then handed the case to court. However, before Markivka District Court could hear the case, the FSB took Fr Feognost's case file from the court. Officers returned it on 26 May 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833), demanding that the occupation police conduct "further work" on the case. The case was never returned to court (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2866).

On 7 June 2024, Russian FSB security service officers came to Fr Feognost's home in Prosyanoie, with a search warrant issued by Russian-controlled Zhovtneve District Court in Luhansk. They searched his home, taking away two phones, two notebook computers and three USB sticks.

"I admit, they treated me like a human being, they didn't put my face in the dirt, didn't hit me, and didn't turn things out of the cupboards," Fr Feognost noted on his Telegram channel on 14 June. He added that he was grateful that, after the officers saw his elderly mother who lives with him, they did not take him to Luhansk, 100 kms (60 miles) away.

It appears the search warrant was issued by Luhansk's Zhovtneve District Court because this is where the branch of Russia's FSB for Luhansk Region is located. It remains unclear if the FSB or other Russian state agency is conducting an investigation into the priest. Forum 18 was unable to reach Russia's FSB for Luhansk Region. Telephones at the court and at the Russian Luhansk Region Investigative Committee went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 19 June.

Officials from different agencies came again to Fr Feognost's home on 11 June. They took him to the nearby town of Markivka for questioning. It appears that officials are conducting "expert analyses" of his publications. "I have no idea what the 'experts' will decide," Fr Feognost noted.

The duty officer at Markivka District Police refused to put Forum 18 through to the head, Aleksandr Mulyar, or any other officer. She refused to say why officers had brought in Fr Feognost for questioning. "I don't have the right to give you such information," she told Forum 18 on 19 June.

"I understand the reason and purpose of these visits!" Fr Feognost noted. "And I have already told my guests that I am ready to stop discussing political topics as soon as my communications equipment is returned to me."

Fr Feognost added: "I will not change my political views, but I am ready not to declare them in public and not to enter into a discussion with those who promote views that are unacceptable to me."

Fr Feognost noted the stress the events had caused him. "In general, in that week there were as many 'guests' as my house has seen in all its history," he noted on Telegram. He also expressed concern about his mother, Taisiya, who lives with him. She is in her eighties and needs constant care.

On 18 June, Fr Feognost noted that officials had summoned him immediately to be included in the military register. They told him that everyone had to be included. "Otherwise they are threatened with 5 years [in prison]," he added. "O Lord, when will this all end?"

Appeal court upholds Baptist Pastor's fine

Pastor Vladimir Rytikov failed to overturn the punishment for leading his Baptist community in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. On 11 June, Luhansk Supreme Court upheld the fine, local Baptists told Forum 18.

Church members accompanied Pastor Rytikov to the court to support him. "Only seven were let in as there were only seven seats in the court," local Baptists noted. "The others were not allowed in."

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 (a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience) and the Krasnodon Baptist congregation have faced repeated pressure (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) from Russian occupation forces in recent years, including raids, fines and a threat of criminal prosecution.

On 28 January, armed men raided the church's Sunday morning worship service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890). Pastor Rytikov was not present at the service.

On 27 April, the Russian-controlled Krasnodon Town Court fined Pastor Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908) on charges of "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) 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.

The head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergei Krupa – who had signed the order to hand the case to court - refused to explain to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903) in April why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home. (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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