

5 August 2024

## OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Orthodox priest's 14-year "espionage" jail term

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

*At a hearing at the Russian-controlled Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol on 2 August, Zaporizhzhia Regional Court jailed 41-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov in a strict regime labour camp for 14 years on "espionage" charges. "I'm in such shock," his mother Svetlana Maksimova told Forum 18. He is likely to be illegally transferred to Russia after any appeal. On 15 August, a verdict is expected in the criminal trial of Olena, a Protestant from Melitopol facing up to 10 years' imprisonment for remarks at a prayer meeting.*

On 2 August, the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court – at a trial held at the Russian-controlled Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol – found 41-year-old Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov guilty on charges of "espionage". The Judge sentenced him to 14 years' imprisonment in a strict regime labour camp. The trial began on 6 June, more than a year after Russian forces had arrested the priest.

Fr Kostiantyn was tried and convicted under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code, which carries a jail term of 10 to 20 years. 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).

"I'm in such shock," Svetlana Maksimova, mother of Fr Kostiantyn, told Forum 18 from government-held Ukraine. "I had hoped for less" (see below).

The official who answered the phone at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office in Melitopol and the duty prosecutor at the Russian-controlled Crimean Prosecutor's Office in Simferopol – which had supported colleagues in Melitopol - refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about Fr Kostiantyn's case (see below).

The listed number for the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court went unanswered, as did the chancellery for criminal cases at Crimea's Supreme Court (see below).

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, did not answer his phone on 5 August.

Sharlay claimed to Forum 18 in October 2023 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 (see below).

"We will appeal against the sentence, though I don't think it will be changed," Svetlana Maksimova insisted to Forum 18. She said she hopes that her son will be included in a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine. She added that she has not seen Fr Kostiantyn since December 2021, two months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see below).

Fr Kostiantyn is likely to remain in Investigation Prison No. 2 in Simferopol until any appeal is heard. Forum 18 was unable to reach the prison by phone on 5 August (see below).

If he loses any appeal, 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).

A verdict is expected on 15 August in the criminal trial of a Protestant from Melitopol in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region, identified only as Olena. She is on trial for remarks she allegedly made at a prayer meeting in a home in July 2023. She faces up to 10 years' imprisonment if convicted on charges of spreading "knowingly false information" about Russia's armed forces (see below).

The Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on Olena's case. "Ask the court," the duty official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18. He then put the phone down. Other officials did not answer the phone (see below).

Arrested in February, it became known in the summer that Olena is being held in a prison in Donetsk (see below).

The 44-year-old Fr Feognost Pushkov has been held since late June in pre-trial detention in Investigation Prison in Starobilsk in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. Prosecutors are investigating him on criminal charges which have not yet been made public. Prosecutors had earlier brought administrative charges against him for his online posts, but the Russian FSB later took the case back from the court (see below).

On 22 July, Russian-controlled Telmanovo District Court in occupied Donetsk Region fined another individual for "illegal missionary activity". Officials at the Court did not answer the phone. Charges under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 carry a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles (see below).

In September 2023, Telmanovo District Court fined two priests for "illegal missionary activity" and ordered their deportation. They were then illegally deported to Russia and, in spring 2024, to Georgia (see below).

A Moscow church has put on display an icon it claimed had been "saved" by Russian troops from "the Russian town of Avdiyivka ". Russian troops seized the Ukrainian town in February. They appear to have taken the icon from the Mary Magdalene Church of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC). A woman at St Elijah's Church in Moscow was unable to explain to Forum 18 how or why the soldiers had taken the icon (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](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.

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. Forum 18 asked Kalanchak's Russian police what action they will take following his killing. "For a long time this [community] hasn't existed here and won't," the duty officer replied. "Forget about it" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2893](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](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](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.

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

Many people handed jail terms in Russian-occupied Ukraine are illegally sent to serve sentences 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."

Orthodox priest's 14-year "espionage" jail term

The criminal trial of Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Vyacheslavovich Maksimov (born 16 March 1983) on charges of "espionage" concluded on 2 August. At the final hearing of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court - held at the Russian-controlled Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol – the Judge found him guilty.

The trial began on 6 June, after the priest had spent more than a year in Russian detention.

Fr Kostiantyn was tried and convicted under Article 276 ("Espionage") of the Russian Criminal Code, which carries a jail term of 10 to 20 years. 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.

The Judge sentenced Fr Kostiantyn to 14 years' imprisonment in a strict regime labour camp, the Russian-controlled Crimean Prosecutor's Office noted on 2 August. The Prosecutor said it had supported the prosecution case. It noted that the case "was initiated based on the materials of the Federal Security Service of Russia for Zaporizhzhia Region".

The Prosecutor's Office published an 8-second video showing Fr Kostiantyn in the defendant's glass box in the courtroom at the Crimean Supreme Court. A woman reflected in the glass presumably was Fr Kostiantyn's state-appointed lawyer. No one else is visible in the video.

"I'm in such shock," Svetlana Maksimova, mother of Fr Kostiantyn, told Forum 18 from government-held Ukraine on 2 August. "I had hoped for less."

The official who answered the phone at Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office on 5 August refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on Fr Kostiantyn's case.

The duty prosecutor at the Russian-controlled Crimean Prosecutor's Office in Simferopol refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about Fr Kostiantyn's case on 5 August.

The listed number for the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court went unanswered on 5 August.

Detained for more than a year

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. 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](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.

The Russian occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2902](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".

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.

The occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office in Melitopol earlier would not say by phone ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2915](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2915)) who was leading the prosecution case against Fr Kostiantyn in court. Nor did it respond to written questions.

Russian occupation forces have a record of fabricating false charges against those they dislike ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2793](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793)).

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, did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called on 5 August.

Sharlay claimed to Forum 18 in October 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2867](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.

"We will appeal against the sentence, though I don't think it will be changed"

"We will appeal against the sentence, though I don't think it will be changed," Svetlana Maksimova, mother of Fr Kostiantyn, insisted to Forum 18. She said she hopes that her son will be included in a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine. She added that she has not seen Fr Kostiantyn since December 2021, two months before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Fr Kostiantyn is likely to remain in Investigation Prison No. 2 in Simferopol until any appeal is heard. Forum 18 was unable to reach the prison by phone on 5 August.

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

If he loses any appeal, 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.

Protestant's verdict for remarks at prayer meeting expected 15 August

A Protestant in her early fifties, identified only as Olena, is facing up to 10 years' imprisonment by a Russian-controlled court for remarks she allegedly made at a prayer meeting in a home in the occupied city of Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region in July 2023. (Unconfirmed reports had mistakenly said she had already been handed a 7-year jail term ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2918](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2918)).

The next hearing in Olena's case is due on 15 August, Protestants familiar with the case told Forum 18. It is expected that the court will hand down its verdict at that hearing.

Olena is being prosecuted under Russian Criminal Code Article 207.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](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.

No one at the listed number for Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court answered the phone whenever Forum 18 called on 5 August. A judge at the Court – who said earlier he was not personally involved in the case of the Protestant – did not respond to Forum 18's 5 August questions on the case.

The Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Region Prosecutor's Office on 5 August refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on Olena's case. "Ask the court," the duty official – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 from Melitopol on 5 August. He then put the phone down.

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, did not answer his phone on 5 August.

Russian occupation forces arrested the Protestant in early 2024 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2908](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2908)). Her whereabouts in the months after her arrest were not known. It became known in summer 2024 that the Russians are holding her in prison in Donetsk.

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](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](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)).

The occupation forces' Zaporizhzhia Region Investigative Committee earlier 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 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2908](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.

Criminal investigation continues into jailed UOC Orthodox priest

Fr Feognost (Timofei Gennadyevich Pushkov, born 6 September 1979) has been held since late June in pre-trial detention in Starobilsk in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. Prosecutors are investigating him on criminal charges which have not yet been made public.

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

Fr Feognost lives with his mother Taisiya (who is in her early eighties), an invalid for whom he is the sole carer, in the village of Prosyanoe near Markivka in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region.

Fr Feognost posted frequently on social media about Orthodox liturgy and history, as well as about current events in the Orthodox Church and more broadly. In 2023, occupation prosecutors brought charges ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2833](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833)) against Fr Feognost under Russia's Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). 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 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2833](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2833)) on 26 May 2023, 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](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 the village of Prosyanoe, with a search warrant issued by Russian-controlled Zhovtneve District Court in Luhansk. They searched his home ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2915](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2915)), taking away two phones, two notebook computers and three USB sticks.

Officials came again to Fr Feognost's home on 11 June and took him to the nearby town of Markivka for questioning ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2915](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2915)). 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".

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]" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2915](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2915)).

"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."

Occupation forces arrest UOC Orthodox priest again

On 20 June, Russian occupation officials arrested Fr Feognost at his home in Prosyanoe in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region.

Fr Feognost's last post on his Telegram channel was on 20 June. "I'm in an ambulance", Fr Feognost wrote ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2918](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2918)), after being summoned to the police station. "They want to lock me up at the police.. I am between life and death. Help me, everyone who can. My mother won't survive this." He had posted earlier in the day about his high blood pressure which he attributed to stress.

Forum 18 tried to find out what happened to Fr Feognost after his arrest. "I can't share information with you," the duty officer at the Russian-controlled Markivka District Police – who did not give his name - told Forum 18 on 26 June ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2918](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2918)). Asked again, he insisted that Fr Feognost "is alive and well", but gave no details. "I have not seen him." The officer said he had met him on earlier occasions.

Asked why Fr Feognost had been arrested, the duty officer insisted: "If anything was done, it was done in accordance with the law."

The duty officer at the Russian-controlled Luhansk Region Investigative Committee refused to say if a criminal case has been opened against Fr Feognost. "We don't have information," he told Forum 18 on 26 June ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2918](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2918)). The Investigative Committee did not answer the phone on 5 August.

Forum 18 wrote to the Russian-controlled Markivka District Court on 27 June asking (if it had ordered Fr Feognost held in pre-trial detention):

- when it took this decision;
- and for what period he is ordered held.

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day locally of 5 August.

Forum 18 wrote to the Culture, Sport, Youth and Religion Department of the Russian-controlled Markivka Municipal District Administration before the start of the working day of 1 July. Forum 18 asked:

- why Fr Feognost had been arrested;
- when a court had ordered him held in pre-trial detention;
- and for what period he is ordered held.

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day locally of 5 August.

Fr Feognost's address in Investigation Prison:

292700, Luhansk Region

Starobelsky raion

g. Starobelsk

ul. Kirova d. 65

FKU Sledstvenny izolyator No. 2 UFSIN Rossii po Luganskoi Narodnoi Respubliki

Another "illegal missionary activity" fine

A Russian-controlled court has handed down another fine in occupied Ukraine to punish "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4). This carries a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

The case against the unknown individual was handed to Telmanovo District Court in Donetsk Region in early July. The initial hearing due on 11 July was postponed and the case was finally heard on 22 July, according to court records. The Judge handed the individual a fine.

Officials at Telmanovo District Court did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called on 5 August.

Following repeated raids on his unregistered Council of Churches Baptist congregation, on 27 April, the Russian-controlled Krasnodon Town Court in occupied Luhansk Region fined Pastor Vladimir Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles on charges of "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4) for leading his unregistered Baptist congregation. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted. On 11 June, Luhansk Supreme Court upheld the fine.

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 in April why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home.

In September 2023, officials of a Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) department responsible for limiting the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in occupied Donetsk Region seized Fr Khristofor Khrimli, and Fr Andri Chui. On 22 September, Telmanovo District Court fined both priests (who are Ukrainian citizens) under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity"). The court also ordered them to be deported "beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation".

Russian occupation officials in October 2023 illegally transferred Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Russia's Rostov Region, where they were held in a Deportation Centre. In early 2024, Russia deported Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Georgia ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2903](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903)).

The Russian occupation authorities also use Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26 to punish the exercise of freedom of religion

or belief in Crimea, which Russia illegally occupied in 2014. Many of those targeted are Muslims who lead prayers in mosques ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2878](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878)).

Russian soldiers steal icon, transfer it to Russia

By the time Russian forces had seized the town of Avdiyivka in Ukraine's Donetsk Region in February, Mary Magdalene Church of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church linked to the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) had suffered some damage but still stood. The icon screen was still standing.

Russian military blogger Yevgeny Lisitsyn posted online on 21 February film of his visit to the church, accompanied by soldiers of the 1st Guards Slavic Brigade. He expressed surprise that icons and books in the church kiosk remained intact. "Astonishing. Usually the Ukrainian army steals everything," he claimed.

The 1st Guards Slavic Brigade handed an icon of the Mother of God and Child – apparently from this church – to St Elijah's Russian Orthodox Church in Cherkizovo on the north-eastern edge of Moscow. "This sacred object was saved in the Russian town [sic] of Avdiyivka by the efforts of the 1st Guards Slavic Brigade named after Prince Vladimir, Equal to the Apostles, one of the divisions named in honour of Orthodox saints," a notice by the icon in the Moscow church declares.

The parish posted an image of the icon on its Telegram channel on 27 July, the day before planned prayers in the church for Russian forces on St Vladimir's day. The parish did not say who gave the Russian troops permission to take the icon.

The woman who answered the phone at St Elijah's Church on 5 August was unable to explain to Forum 18 how or why the soldiers had taken the icon. Military blogger Lisitsyn confirmed to Forum 18 the same day that he had been at Avdiyivka's Mary Magdalene Orthodox Church in February but did not say if soldiers had taken the icon from there. (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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