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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Religious freedom survey, March 2025

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Freedom of religion or belief and interlinked human rights are seriously violated in Russian-occupied Ukraine. Forum 18's survey analysis documents among other violations: serious systemic freedom of religion or belief violations starting with the initial March 2014 invasion; pressuring, kidnapping, torturing, jailing, and murdering religious leaders; stopping meetings for worship, banning and closing religious communities; jailing prisoners of conscience for exercising freedom of religion or belief; banning religious texts and purging libraries; and "anti-missionary" prosecutions. Until Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory is ended, the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights violations seem set to continue.

Freedom of religion or belief and interlinked human rights are seriously violated in Russian-occupied Ukraine. As of March 2025, Russia illegally occupies about a fifth of Ukraine's territory. Forum 18's survey analysis documents:

- serious systemic freedom of religion or belief violations starting with the initial March 2014 invasion;
- illegal annexation of territory and imposition of Russian law violating human rights;
- pressuring, kidnapping, torturing, jailing, and murdering religious leaders;
- stopping meetings for worship, banning and closing religious communities;
- jailing prisoners of conscience for exercising freedom of religion or belief;
- transnational repression;
- banning religious texts and purging libraries;
- "anti-missionary" prosecutions; and
- the broadcasting of disinformation against religious communities and believers.

The fundamental cause of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights violations in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory is Russia's invasion and occupation from 2014 onwards of Ukraine. Until Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory is ended, the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights violations seem set to continue.

March 2014 – February 2022 freedom of religion or belief violations in then-occupied areas

The renewed February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was preceded by the 2014 invasion and illegal annexation (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>) of the Crimean peninsula (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051) when Russian-controlled rebels also seized some eastern parts of Ukraine's Donbas Region.

Serious systemic violations of many human rights followed the 2014 invasion. In occupied Crimea (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=86>) these have included raids, fines, religious literature seizures, official surveillance, expulsions of invited foreign religious leaders, unilateral cancellation of property rental contracts, and obstructions to regaining Soviet-confiscated places of worship. Compulsory re-registration of religious communities was imposed, and of the 1,156 religious communities which had Ukrainian legal status only about 400 had gained Russian legal status by early 2016, when the re-registration deadline expired (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2137).

Serious systemic violations of many human rights also took place in the eastern parts of Ukraine's Donbas Region before Russia's February 2022 renewed invasion (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>). Among the freedom of religion or belief violations documented by Forum 18 in the occupied Luhansk areas (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721) up to

the February 2022 renewed invasion are (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>):

- the banning by the State Security Ministry (SSM) secret police of all Ukrainian Baptist Union communities, despite this being illegal under LPR law as no court order was apparently made;
- surveillance of local religious communities, and the encouragement by LPR rebels of a climate of fear about discussing human rights violations;
- cutting off gas, water, and electricity supplies and denials of access to all places of worship owned by unregistered communities;
- contacts with fellow believers of any faith elsewhere in Ukraine being made difficult or impossible, including repeated denials of permission to a Catholic priest resident in Luhansk since 1993 to continue to live and serve in the region, as well as to nuns to return to a parish. This resulted in the repeated inability of Catholics to receive Communion at Mass;
- and an increasing list of banned allegedly "extremist" books, including a Russian-language edition of the Gospel of John originally published in 1820.

Illegal annexation of territory, imposition of Russian law

In February 2014 Russia invaded and then in March 2014 illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine (<https://www.nhc.no/en/qa-breaches-of-international-law-and-human-rights-issues-2/>). Occupied Crimea is administered by Russia in two federal subjects or regions following the Ukrainian administrative divisions, the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or by the overwhelming majority of United Nations (UN) member states. In March 2014, Russian-controlled rebels also seized parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region and Donetsk Region, declaring what they described as "People's Republics" in both entities.

On 5 October 2022, following "referenda" that were widely denounced by the international community, Russia illegally annexed the territories it invaded after February 2022. These are in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions as well as the territory of the Russian-created Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), retaining these two names. "The so-called 'referenda' in Ukraine were conducted in areas under Russian occupation," UN Secretary-General António Guterres said on Twitter on 29 September 2022. "They can't be called a genuine expression of the popular will."

On 19 October 2022, Russia imposed martial law on the parts of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia which it has illegally occupied and annexed. Russia's 2002 Law on Martial Law grants the Russian president the power in areas under martial law to "halt the activity of political parties, public organisations and religious associations conducting propaganda and/or agitation as well as other subversive activity".

Russian occupation officials illegally insist that Russian law applies to the occupied territories, and state that any exercise of freedom of religion or belief not permitted will be punished under Russia's Criminal or Administrative Codes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). This illegally bans and punishes activities such as unregistered meetings for worship, or protesting for a religious reason against Russia's war and occupation of Ukrainian territory.

Under 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>) (2nd part), occupation authorities must respect the laws in force (<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-64/commentary/1958>) in the country (Ukraine) "unless absolutely prevented".

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) condemned "the unlawful application of Russian Federation legislation by the occupation authorities of the Russian Federation in the occupied territory [Crimea (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=86>)]" 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>).

Large-scale human rights violations of all kinds, attempt to give impunity

Freedom of religion or belief violations in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory are part of a much broader pattern of serious human rights violations of all kinds committed by Russian occupation forces, as the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has documented in detail from March 2014 onwards (<https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/reports>).

In December 2022, the Human Rights Monitoring Mission released a report documenting (<https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/killings-civilians-summary-executions-and-attacks-individual-civilians-EN>) that "Russian armed forces summarily executed or carried out attacks on individuals leading to the deaths of hundreds of civilians".

In July 2023, against international law, Russia adopted a law claiming to give its officials and armed forces impunity from prosecution for crimes if acting "in the interests of the Russian Federation" during the invasion and occupation (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/russia-grants-immunity-crimes-committed-states-interests>). The law also attempts to deny justice to those who have been illegally prosecuted by occupation authorities.

On 8 November 2023, three United Nations Special Rapporteurs - on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clement Nyaletsossi Voule; on minority issues, Nicolas Levrat; and on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea - wrote to the Russian authorities (AL RUS 25/2023 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=28563>)) over their concerns about violations of freedom of religion or belief in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.

"Incidents of enforced disappearances and attacks on clergy in the occupied territories are widespread," the three Special Rapporteurs noted. They expressed their "serious concern" over the reports of "enforced disappearances and torture or ill-treatment of clergy in the occupied territories in violation of international human rights law".

"Please urgently provide information on any members of the clergy from the occupied territories currently detained by Russian authorities," the Special Rapporteurs asked.

The Russian Permanent Mission to the UN replied on 21 November 2023 (<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadFile?gId=37833>), claiming it "has the honour to note the unacceptable nature of the content of the communication". The Russian government went on to claim 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."

In its 40th Periodic Report on the treatment of prisoners of war and update on the human rights situation in Ukraine (including Russian-occupied territory) for 1 June to 31 August 2024, published on 1 October 2024, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and OHCHR said it "continued to document cases of arbitrary detention, torture, including sexual violence, and enforced disappearance of civilians in the occupied territory".

"OHCHR also documented cases of arbitrary detention when the occupying authorities detained people for what appeared to be legitimate exercise of their freedom of expression or religion and belief," the report added. "In several of these cases, those affected shared information with OHCHR on a confidential basis, fearing that publication of details about their cases could result in repercussions."

Such information has similarly been confidentially shared with Forum 18 by targets of human rights violations, who have also asked that the information is not published.

The 41st UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and OHCHR report on the human rights situation in Ukraine between 1 September and 30 November 2024 (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2024-12-31-pr41-ukraine-en.pdf>) stated: "Russian authorities continued to restrict the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in violation of their obligations under IHL [international humanitarian law] and IHRL [international human rights law]." The report, published on 31 December 2024, called on Russia to: "Respect freedom of religion or belief in the occupied territory, in accordance with its obligations under IHRL and IHL."

Pressuring, kidnapping, torturing, jailing, murdering religious leaders

Russian occupation forces have seized many religious leaders of a variety of religious communities. In most of these cases it is unclear if they were targeted specifically for their exercise of the freedom of religion or belief, or because they are independent Ukrainian community leaders.

Religious leaders of all faiths who refuse to join Russian-controlled religious organisations appear to be particular targets of the occupation forces. Priests of both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) have been disappeared after they reject pressure to join new dioceses the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church has unilaterally established on occupied Ukrainian territory.

It is common for the occupation forces to disappear the people they seize, sometimes for months at a time, leaving fellow-believers, relatives, and friends uncertain if they are still alive. Torture is also a common experience of many who have been seized.

In a case where a priest refused to join a Russian-controlled body, Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov served as priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate's (UOC) Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the city of Tokmak in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region.

Russian occupation forces detained Fr Kostiantyn in May 2023, and refused for more than 10 months until March 2024 to give any information about where he was being held or if he was still alive. Artyom Sharlay, the 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 that Fr Kostiantyn had not wanted the UOC's Berdyansk Diocese to move to be an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) took over the Diocese in May 2023.

In late March 2024, the occupation forces' Regional Prosecutor's Office announced that 41-year-old Fr Kostiantyn would be put on trial under Russian Criminal Code Article 276 ("Espionage"). Russian occupation forces have a record of fabricating false charges against those they dislike.

"This is terrible!" another local Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) priest, Fr Vladimir Saviisky, who knew Fr Kostiantyn, told Forum 18. "But this was to be expected. The Russians threatened me with this also. Had they not deported me, I would have been sitting next to him in a prison cell." Fr Vladimir also opposed the May 2023 Russian Orthodox Church takeover of the UOC's Berdyansk Diocese, and left Russian-occupied territory the following month.

On 2 August 2024, the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court – at a closed trial held at the Russian-controlled Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol – jailed Fr Kostiantyn for 14 years in a strict regime labour camp on "espionage" charges. "I'm in such shock," his mother Svetlana Maksimova told Forum 18. On 14 November 2024, a panel of Judges chaired by Pavel Melekhin at the First Appeal Court in Moscow rejected his appeal.

In February 2025, the prison authorities in Russian-occupied Crimea illegally transferred Fr Kostiantyn to a strict regime labour camp in Russia's Saratov Region. He arrived there on 11 February and was placed in quarantine for two weeks. The camp is more than 1,000 kms (600 miles) by land from the Russian-occupied Ukrainian town of Tokmak in Zaporizhzhia Region, where he was serving his parish.

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."

The Russian-installed Crimean Ombudsperson's Office refused to explain to Forum 18 in February 2025 why Russian authorities illegally transfer prisoners from Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine – like Fr Kostiantyn and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience from occupied Crimea - to prisons in Russia.

In another case, Rustem Asanov, a Crimean Tatar, was Imam of the Muslim Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in the village of Shchastlivtseve in Henichesk District in Ukraine's Kherson Region. Russian occupation forces detained and tortured him in March 2022. After they released him, Russian occupation forces came to inspect the Mosque's contents. "With them was a Muslim apparently from the [Russian] North Caucasus, possibly from Dagestan and possibly working for them," Asanov told Forum 18. "He was obviously responsible for Muslims. He looked through all the books and confiscated those that he deemed 'not correct'. He had no list of literature with him, and was obviously identifying books [to confiscate] from memory." Asanov estimates that the unidentified man took about one third of the mosque's books.

Russian military and other occupation officials demanded that religious communities and leaders affiliate with Russian instead of Ukrainian religious entities. While Imam Asanov was being held and tortured in March 2022 by Russian forces, one man in civilian clothes insisted that he co-operate with the occupation authorities. The man would not give his name, but gave his call sign as "Bars" (Leopard). Imam Asanov suspects from "Bars" manner that he was from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

"Bars" told Asanov that in time, all religious communities in Russian-occupied territory would be required to re-register with Russia's Justice Ministry under Russian law, Asanov told Forum 18. "Ukraine won't exist," "Bars" told him. Imam Asanov fled from Russian-occupied territory to Ukrainian government-held territory in late March 2022.

The Birlik (Unity) Mosque community in Shchastlivtseve remains closed. (The Russian authorities have registered no Muslim communities in occupied parts of Kherson Region.)

Similarly, Fr Vladimir Saviisky was priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate's (UOC) St Nicholas Church in Primorsk, a town on the Sea of Azov in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. Russian occupation forces seized the area in late February 2022. Fr Vladimir continued to lead prayers in church for Ukraine, and faced multiple raids and arrests by Russian occupation forces. Fr Vladimir complained of constant pressure. "The seventh time such an 'interrogation' occurred was when I refused to sign a petition to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church," he told Current Time TV for a 4 July 2023 feature.

After the 16 May 2023 takeover by the Russian Orthodox Church of the UOC Berdyansk Diocese, Russian officials told Fr Vladimir and other clergy not to commemorate in the liturgy the head of the UOC Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovsky). The takeover took place just days before Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov (see above) was seized. Russian occupation forces told the clergy: "Commemorate only the Patriarch [Kirill] and the new bishop whom Moscow sent, cooperate with the authorities - and everything will be fine with you, manna will fall from heaven." Fr Vladimir added: "They asked us to tell the people in the church to stop resisting and start thinking differently."

Later in May 2023, Russian soldiers came to Fr Vladimir's home at 11 pm, telling him: "Take off your cross and cassock." Fr Vladimir refused. "They drove me around the city, demanding that I accept this decision of the Moscow Synod that the Berdyansk Diocese had now transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church. I said that I remain a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), I am a Ukrainian priest. I have a Metropolitan in Kyiv - His Beatitude Onufry."

After Russian occupation forces warned Fr Vladimir that he faced being stripped of his priestly office and then jailed for his pro-Ukrainian views, he reluctantly on 1 June 2023 left Russian-occupied territory.

A 26 February 2024 meeting of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, chaired by the Russian-imposed governor Yevgeny Balitsky, noted that "thanks to the great amount of work of the internal policy bloc of Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, assistance was provided to the Berdyansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the transition to the direct control of the Russian Orthodox Church". The meeting also noted that "assistance was provided to the religious communities of Evangelical Christian Baptists in integrating into all-Russian structures".

In another case, on 16 November 2022 Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) arrested and disappeared two parish priests in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the Black Sea coastal town of Berdyansk (Zaporizhzhia Region), Hieromonk Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta. Russia's National Guard reports directly to the Russian President. This ended public organised Greek Catholic life in the city.

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church told Forum 18 in 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.

The day after Russia's National Guard seized and disappeared Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan, Russian forces searched Berdyansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin - where the priests served - and claim to have found explosives and allegedly "extremist" literature. They made the claims on an occupation TV channel.

The occupation forces refused to give any information about whether the two priests were alive or dead. Both priests appeared to be facing Russian criminal charges related to weapons and explosives occupation forces falsely claim they found. Relatives and the Church had been denied contact with the priests since November 2022.

Russia's Ombudsperson Tatyana Moskalkova claimed on Telegram on 23 May 2024 that she had "recently visited the Catholic priests in their place of detention and made sure that the conditions corresponded to international standards". She did not name the priests, but the 47-year-old Fr Ivan and 59-year-old Fr Bohdan were the only two Catholic priests known to be in Russian detention.

Moskalkova did not say when and where the alleged meeting took place. However, she visited Russia's Rostov Region on 2 May. The following day she was in Ukraine's Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. There she visited the town of Horlivka (Gorlovka in Russian), together with the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk, Darya Morozova.

Russian authorities including Moskalkova did not answer Forum 18's questions about the priests. 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".

Russian occupation forces released Fr Bohdan and Fr Ivan (with 8 other Ukrainian civilians) in a prisoner exchange on 28 June 2024 after 19 months in detention.

Russian occupation forces have also apparently murdered religious leaders they have seized. On 13 February 2024, unknown men from the occupation forces seized 59-year-old Fr Stepan Podolchak of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in the Ukrainian village of Kalanchak in the Russian-occupied part of Kherson Region. He chose to remain in Kalanchak to serve his community after the Russian occupation of much of Ukraine's Kherson Region in early 2022.

"Fr Stepan was someone who felt he couldn't abandon his people," Serhy Danilov, who worked on projects to support civil society in Kherson Region from 2014, told Forum 18. Russian officials banned Fr Stepan's community from continuing to use a rented room in Kalanchak's House of Culture, but he continued to lead services in the half-finished church he was building. "The [Russian] police

and FSB repeatedly pressured Fr Stepan to move to the Moscow Patriarchate," Danilov told Forum 18. "He told them he couldn't betray his oath and community."

The men took Fr Stepan away barefoot with a bag over his head, his captors insisting he needed to come for questioning. Danilov thinks the men who seized Fr Stepan were from the Russian Interior Ministry's Centre for Countering Extremism. He thinks from knowledge of other people seized by the Russians that they might have taken Fr Stepan to the detention centre at nearby Chaplinka.

On 15 February 2024, Fr Stepan's body – possibly with a bullet-wound to the head - was found on the street in Kalanchak and taken to the morgue. Morgue staff phoned his wife to identify the body, which showed signs of bruising and traces of having been in handcuffs. The death certificate issued to the family claimed that Fr Stepan had died of a heart attack. Fr Stepan's family buried his body in Kalanchak on Sunday 18 February 2024.

When Forum 18 on 19 February 2024 asked Kalanchak's Russian police what action they had taken or would take following the apparent murder of Fr Stepan, the duty officer (who would not give his name) replied: "For a long time this [community] hasn't existed here and won't. Forget about it."

The reply indicates the chilling effect on the interlinked freedoms of religion of belief, assembly, and association which such apparent murders are intended to have.

Similarly, on 22 November 2022 Russian occupation forces 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 their shot and mutilated bodies were found in a nearby wood. They were buried on 29 November. The (Russian) Kherson Region Anti-Terrorism Centre refused to answer Forum 18's questions, and the (Russian) Nova Kakhovka Police avoided answering Forum 18's questions.

Stopping meetings for worship, banning and closing religious communities

Russian occupation forces have repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory. Fr Peter Krenický, a Greek Catholic priest originally from Slovakia, led the Assumption of St Anna parish in Melitopol in southern Zaporizhzhia Region from 2010 until the Russian occupation forces expelled him to government-held Ukraine in November 2022. He chose to remain with his parish after Russian forces seized the city in late February 2022.

Fr Peter served the morning liturgy at Melitopol's Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church on 25 November 2022, where he noticed two members of the Russian FSB security service in civilian clothes. "They tried to pretend they were believers, one crossed himself with his right hand, the other with his left, they stood up awkwardly, they knelt," Fr Peter told the Greek Catholic Zhyve TV for an 8 December 2022 programme.

After breakfast with men undertaking building work in the parish, he went into the yard of the parish house. "That's when a car arrived, about six men got out of it, I don't remember exactly, they closed the gate and immediately started beating me," Fr Peter recalled. The men were apparently from Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya). "They pushed me against the wall and beat me, then they beat me in the knees, thank God, I can walk, but they beat me, I don't remember everything anymore." An FSB official then told the men to stop beating Fr Peter. The occupation officials also seized one of the workers, and banged his head against the wall until it bled.

The occupation officials searched the parish house and then beat Fr Peter again. They then ordered him to pack a bag, banning him from putting on his cassock or taking any religious item except a Bible, his breviary and a rosary.

The officials – who Fr Peter says were from the FSB – then put a bag over his head and drove him to a place close to the frontline. Officials checked his passport and handed him to another official, who took his phone and money and then read a statement on camera that the Russian Federation was "deporting" him "because my activity does not support Moscow's policy and I belong to a church that opposes this policy". After threatening to shoot Fr Peter, the officer ordered him to walk across the frontline to the Ukrainian checkpoint.

Fr Peter had tried to prepare his parish for the time when he might not be there. "I told the people that when I'm not here, when I have to leave, continue meeting for prayer, reading the word of God, singing antiphons, troparies and kondaks, and singing the reading. I asked a man from the parish to preach the Gospel."

In 2022, the Russian occupation authorities also forcibly closed and seized Protestant churches in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region, including Grace Protestant Church (led by Pastor Mikhail Britsin), Melitopol Christian Church (led by Pastor Viktor Sergejev), and Word of Life Church (led by Pastor Dmytro Bodyu). Pastor Britsin puts the number of closed Protestant Churches in Melitopol at 13, with two Greek Catholic Churches also closed.

"We were interrogated many times by the FSB [Russian security service], who tried to force us to become collaborators," Pastor

Britsin told Forum 18 from government-controlled Ukraine in December 2023. "They did not like the fact that our Church openly supports the Ukrainian position, sings and prays in Ukrainian. It was obvious that we do not accept their rules and do not support the occupation. We also provided humanitarian aid to the needy. But this broke the picture for Russian propaganda, which tried to show 'liberation' as a benefit for the people." Russian officials threatened to arrest him and other ministers and take them to Donetsk, which has been under Russian occupation since 2014.

Armed and masked officials in Russian military uniforms seized Melitopol's Grace Church during Sunday worship on 11 September 2022. After the seizure of the church, Russian officials (apparently from the FSB) detained Pastor Britsin, searched his home and took his documents. They gave him two days to leave Russian-occupied territory, and he left for government-controlled Ukraine in September 2022. The Russian occupation Culture Ministry took over Grace Church building. They removed the cross from the top of the building, repainted the facade brown, and hung four portraits of soldiers high up on the building's facade. The church library, which contained thousands of books, was burned in the church yard.

Artyom Sharlay of the Russian occupiers' Zaporizhzhia Religious Organisations Department insisted to Forum 18 in October 2023 that only "law-abiding" religious communities are allowed to exist in the parts of the Ukrainian region the occupiers control. On 26 December 2022 the Russian-installed governor of the part of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region under Russian occupation, Yevgeny Balitsky, banned four religious communities. In four separate decrees, he banned Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, Word of Life Protestant Church, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

Balitsky's four decrees claim that the four Churches "carry out their activity with violations of the legislation on religious and public organisations of the Russian Federation". All four are accused of links with foreign "special services", including with those of the United States. Balitsky also accused members of Grace Church, Word of Life Church, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of participating in "mass disorder and anti-Russian meetings in March and April 2022".

Occupation Governor Balitsky specifically accused Grace Church's Pastor Britsin of "agitation against the Russian Federation and against the establishment of peaceful life on the territory of Zaporizhzhia Region". He also accused Pastor Viktor Sergeyev of Melitopol Christian Church of storing weapons and radio communication equipment in his home and in the church building. The Greek Catholic Church was also accused of storing weapons and explosives in its church, "distributing literature calling for the destruction of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation", and "active participation" in "the activity of extremist organisations and propaganda of neo-Nazi ideas".

Occupation Governor Balitsky banned all four religious communities, annulled any property rental agreements, and ordered all movable and immovable property to be handed to the Zaporizhzhia Region Military/Civilian Administration. He also ordered a ban on any registration of these communities under Russian law in Zaporizhzhia Region and banned their leaders from registering any other religious or public organisations under Russian law. He also ordered the seizure of Pastor Sergeyev's personal and family property, and ordered the Russian-controlled police to consider bringing a criminal prosecution against him for allegedly storing weapons.

Occupation Governor Balitsky also banned Grace Church's Azov Lighthouse recreational centre, various branches of the Caritas aid agency, and the Knights of Columbus. This is a Catholic fraternal order which Balitsky alleged "is connected with the special services of the USA and the Vatican".

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Balitsky signed such sweeping decrees banning the four Churches. Yevgeniya Zaitseva, spokesperson for the Russian occupation Zaporizhzhia Region Administration, did not respond to Forum 18's question on 20 December 2023. Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, did not answer his phone between 18 and 20 December 2023.

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".

Russian occupation officials treat all Ukrainian religious communities which have not received Russian state registration as illegal. Occupation officials have also banned many religious communities from meeting for worship in parts of Ukraine they illegally claim to have annexed.

Some individuals and communities continue to meet for worship secretly to try to avoid possible repercussions, but the level of control over the exercise of freedom of religion or belief varies from place to place. "In the occupied territories, each settlement has its own authority and a lot depends on it - whether they close places of worship or allow people to meet," a resident of the occupied territories told Forum 18 in mid-May 2023.

One leader of a religious community whose place of worship has been forcibly closed continues to lead worship at home. "Sometimes the boldest believers will come to join the leader," an individual who knows the leader told Forum 18 from Ukrainian

government-controlled territory in May 2023. A Protestant in the occupied territories stated that the Russian occupying forces have closed most Protestant churches. "So people meet at home, trying not to attract the attention of their neighbours, because denunciations in these territories are a common thing," the Protestant told Forum 18 in May 2023.

"There are prayer houses that continue their services, meeting at their own risk, but this is a matter of time. Believers continue to pray, hold services, but in a simplified form, some in apartments, some at home, but faith helps people to live in new conditions and a new reality," the Protestant added.

In another example, the Russian Police's Centre for Countering Extremism repeatedly raided Alushta's independent Yukhary-Jami mosque in Crimea (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=86>). On 23 November 2023, armed and masked officials raided the mosque, seizing Islamic books. Early that morning they also raided the homes of the imam, Yusuf Ashirov, and two mosque community leaders. The three men were then jailed for between two and five days.

On Friday 24 November 2023 – while Imam Ashirov was in prison - officials of the Centre for Countering Extremism came to Yukhary-Jami mosque to support an Imam appointed by the Crimean Muslim Board (to which the mosque does not belong). "They conducted Friday prayers at gunpoint, threatening that if any of the people stood up and began to give the hutba [sermon], they would simply take him away from there," lawyer Rustem Kyamilev told human rights group Crimean Solidarity.

Early on 30 November 2023, about six masked officers raided the home of Abdul Gafarov, the chair of Yukhary-Jami mosque community. Only one of the officers identified himself, Lieutenant Colonel Ruslan Shambazov, head of the police's Centre for Countering Extremism in Crimea. He told Gafarov that he had to get the community to accept the new Imam imposed by the Crimean Muslim Board and keep the community calm. No official answered Forum 18's questions about the case, including why Lieutenant Colonel Shambazov saw it as his role to interfere in the affiliation of a religious community and who it chooses as its leader.

Such raids continue. Armed, masked men broke up worship meetings of a Council of Churches Baptist church in Russian-occupied Melitopol three times between October 2023 and November 2024. They checked members' passports and church literature. Russian Police questioned the church's Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, insisting he led a religious service without informing the authorities and conducted illegal missionary activity. On 18 December 2024, a court closed one case because of the statute of limitations, issued a warning in another, and set a trial date for the third of 21 January 2025.

The Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Dmitry Zagoruyko, who drew up the records of an offence against Pastor Malakhov. "He doesn't talk by phone to anyone about anything," she told Forum 18 in December 2024. Forum 18 was unable to reach the Russian Melitopol Police to find out why its officers raided a meeting for worship. Police did not answer their phones whenever Forum 18 called.

Jailing other prisoners of conscience

The Russian occupation forces have also jailed other prisoners of conscience for exercising their freedom of religion or belief. These have mainly been Jehovah's Witnesses in occupied Crimea, who are jailed because they met together for prayer and worship after Russia's 2017 ban on the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses as allegedly "extremist".

When investigators launch criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses on "extremism" charges, armed and masked occupation officials also launch early morning raids on individuals' homes. Investigators are usually accompanied by armed and often masked security personnel. Officials "crudely demanded the passwords for electronic devices, asked questions about fellow-believers, and in one case threatened to harm a pet", Jehovah's Witnesses stated after August 2024 raids associated with the criminal case against 69-year-old Tamara Brattseva. Occupation officials also seized electronic devices, personal notes, and money. Her trial began in December 2024.

In the latest jailings, on 14 January 2025 after a 22-month trial from March 2023, a judge in the Russian-occupied port city of Sevastopol found two Jehovah's Witnesses, 53-year-old Sergey Zhigalov and 55-year-old Viktor Kudinov, guilty of organising the activities of a banned "extremist" organisation. He jailed them for six years each. They remained in pre-trial detention in Simferopol awaiting appeal hearings.

Such jail terms are typical in these cases. On 3 October 2024 the Russian-appointed Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol increased the sentences of two Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Krasnogvardeiskoe in central Crimea, Yury Gerashchenko and Sergey Parfenovich. A panel of judges accepted the Prosecutor's arguments that their six-year suspended sentences were "too soft" and changed them to six years in a labour camp. As normally happens in these cases, both prisoners of conscience have now been illegally transferred to labour camps in Russia.

"Secret" witnesses who claim to have attended Jehovah's Witness meetings are often used in such cases. One prisoner of conscience commented that a "secret" witness used to jail them is "known as a provocateur, whom the FSB uses for the illegal and shameful persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sevastopol. This witness gives knowingly false and contradictory testimony. Also, this

testimony is word for word identical to the testimony of FSB officer Dmitrienko, which indicates that it is falsified."

Allegedly independent "experts" are also often used in such cases. One such "expert" has been Olga Griva, a university professor who also teaches at a Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate Seminary. Forum 18 asked Griva in March 2023 whether there was not a conflict of interest for a prosecution "expert" affiliated with one faith to be commenting on the religious views and activities of individuals of another faith. "There was no conflict of interest," she insisted. "I brought my professional knowledge and experience to the case."

Prisoners of conscience Zhigalov and Kudinov lodged appeals against the convictions on 27 January 2025. The appeals are due to be heard at Sevastopol City Court, and they remain in Investigation Prison in Simferopol until the appeals have been heard.

Jehovah's Witnesses commented to Forum 18 in January 2025: "In Crimea, in the last two years alone [from 2022], the number of accused has doubled - from 16 to 32. Eleven believers have been sent to labour camps for long terms." If Zhigalov and Kudinov lose their appeals, this would bring the number of Crimean prisoners of conscience jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief to 13. Another is serving a suspended sentence, and yet another an assigned work sentence. All the current prisoners of conscience from occupied Crimea, who were jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, are Jehovah's Witnesses.

The other prisoners of conscience from occupied Crimea jailed for exercising their freedom of religion or belief have all been Muslim. Four members of Tabligh Jamaat (which Russia's Supreme Court has also banned as "extremist") were arrested in October 2017 for meeting with other Muslims in mosques to discuss their faith. Renat Suleimanov was jailed for four years, illegally transferred to a Russian labour camp, and freed at the end of his sentence in December 2020. The other three Muslims served suspended sentences.

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." Russian occupation officials have repeatedly refused to explain to Forum 18 why they illegally transfer prisoners from Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine to prisons in Russia.

Other trials against Jehovah's Witnesses in occupied Crimea are still in progress.

Transnational repression

Russia's repression of individuals who exercise freedom of religion or belief also has a transnational dimension, which can sometimes be quite open. Russia runs a Federal Wanted List which as of October 2024 had about 100,000 people wanted on criminal charges. The most high-profile figure is Kaja Kallas, former Estonian Prime Minister and the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

At least 45 individuals on Russia's Federal Wanted List face criminal charges to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief or for reporting on violations of this right. Sixteen of these individuals are on Russia's list because they are wanted by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Four of these individuals are Jehovah's Witnesses from Russian-occupied Crimea who – like 16 wanted co-believers from within Russia's internationally-recognised boundaries - continued after Russia's 2017 ban on Jehovah's Witnesses to meet in private homes for prayer and study of the Bible with other Jehovah's Witnesses.

If any of these individuals are found in Russia or states friendly to Russia, they risk immediate arrest and immediate transfer to that country.

The family and acquaintances of those on the Federal Wanted List are under surveillance, including wiretapping, to monitor possible contacts.

Communities' forced re-registration under Russian law

The Russian occupation authorities insist that religious communities that want to exist must register under Russian law. Their leaders must have accepted Russian citizenship.

As of early March 2025, the Russian authorities had registered 186 communities (158 of them of the Russian Orthodox Church) in the occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia Region, 61 in the occupied parts of Kherson Region, 440 in the occupied parts of Donetsk Region, 294 in the occupied parts of Luhansk Region, 123 in the occupied Crimean city of Sevastopol and 904 in the rest of the occupied Crimean peninsula.

Communities banned in Russia – like Jehovah's Witnesses – have been stripped of registration. Communities the Russian authorities do not like – including the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Greek Catholic Church (with the exception of Crimea, where they

have been allowed to register as "Catholics of the Byzantine Rite", and one community with no priest in Donetsk), and Roman Catholics (with the exception of Crimea, and one community with no priest in Luhansk) – do not have Russian registration and therefore cannot openly meet.

Communities that wish to retain links to Ukrainian headquarter bodies or associations are not allowed to register. The Russian authorities have registered some Muslim and Protestant communities which have either cut ties to Ukrainian headquarter bodies and linked to Russian-based bodies or remain independent.

Banning texts, purging libraries

The Russian occupation authorities have purged libraries to remove books they consider "extremist" or otherwise dislike. Many of these books cover Ukrainian 20th-century and 21st-century history, including those on Ukrainian religious leaders. The occupation authorities also remove books related to religious communities Russian courts have banned as "extremist", such as Jehovah's Witnesses (banned by Russia's Supreme Court in 2017).

In a 20 January 2023 letter, acting Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) Education and Science Minister Yevgeny Miroschnichenko ordered the heads of educational establishments to remove "literature of an extremist nature, expressing the ideology of Ukrainian nationalism" from their libraries. The LPR had earlier banned various texts as "extremist", including in 2019 an edition of the Gospel of John in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation originally published in 1820.

Miroschnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry supplied a list of 365 books to be removed. He also ordered libraries to remove a wide range of other literature, including anything about the Holodomor (Stalin's deliberately caused 1932-33 famine which killed millions of Ukrainians), literature "propagandising European gender 'values'", literature on events in Ukraine since 2014, and all 90 books from Famous Ukrainians, a biographical series aimed at teenagers.

The Famous Ukrainians series includes a book on St Petro Mohyla, a 17th century Orthodox Metropolitan of Kyiv who was known for his educational and publishing activities, and a book on Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky.

Metropolitan Sheptytsky headed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church until his death in 1944. He protected Jews from the Holocaust at a time when such acts were punishable by death, as well as publicly protesting to the Nazi leadership against the Holocaust. In March 2013, a Moscow court ruled that a small book with a sermon by Metropolitan Sheptytsky – republished in Ukrainian in Poland in 1990 – was "extremist". Russia's Justice Ministry then added the book to its Federal List of Extremist Materials. This banned the book from being produced or distributed in Russia, and meant that anyone possessing it could be prosecuted.

Miroschnichenko's list of "extremist" books to be removed also includes a book on Metropolitan Sheptytsky by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience Myroslav Marynovych. "I believe in God and in Ukraine", by the former Soviet prisoner of conscience and Orthodox Christian Levko Lukyanenko, is also on the "extremist" book list.

Miroschnichenko of the LPR Education and Science Ministry ordered libraries to remove all such "extremist" books and put them in sealed boxes, and report on this to the Ministry by 24 January 2023. Educational establishment heads who failed to do so would bear personal responsibility, he warned.

Yelena Bakhmut, the official who prepared the letter for Miroschnichenko, refused to discuss it on 2 February 2023 or answer Forum 18's questions.

The Russian-imposed LPR Culture Minister Dmitry Sidorov told a meeting chaired by Russia's Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova on 20 January 2023 that public libraries have already removed "extremist" literature.

Oleg Pomnikov, the head of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Department of the LPR Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry, defended the removal from libraries of "extremist" books with false claims. "Sheptytsky was an active supporter of Nazism and of Ukrainian nationalism," he claimed to Forum 18 in January 2023. "The Greek Catholic Church supported the Banderists." He made no comment about St Petro Mohyla.

Natalya Rastorguyevka, director of the LPR's Gorky Universal Science Library, refused to discuss the removal of works the LPR and Russian government regards as "extremist" from local libraries. She also refused to say if her library has, for example, removed any religious works on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

The neighbouring Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) also conducted such a book purge. On 30 May 2022, the Russian-backed head of the DPR, Denis Pushilin, signed a Decree bringing the DPR's "Republican List of Extremist Materials" into line with Russia's "Federal List of Extremist Materials". The Russian Federal List includes a number of religious works, including books by the Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi and many Jehovah's Witness publications.

The DPR's list included three Muslim booklets published by the Donbas Muftiate, banned in July 2016, as well as 12 Jehovah's

Witness books and websites banned in 2017 and 2018, including its main international website. The DPR's list, last updated to include court bans in October 2020, remains accessible on the DPR Justice Ministry website. It is unclear if the materials it lists as "extremist" remain banned locally if they are not also on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials.

On 21 May 2023, the DPR's Culture Ministry began a programme of removing from public libraries literature that it regards as "extremist". Viktoriya Kamynina, chief specialist in the Culture Ministry's Religion and Nationalities Department, told a briefing in Donetsk on 25 May that specialists from the Krupskaya Donetsk Republic Universal Scientific Library were travelling to newly-seized towns and villages to remove such literature from libraries.

Kamynina said about 2,000 "extremist" publications had already been removed. These included not only books on Ukrainian culture and history and books about Adolf Hitler, but books on "political and religious figures".

Forum 18 asked both the Culture Ministry and the Krupskaya Library in writing in October 2023 what religious books had been removed from libraries and who determined whether any particular book on religion was "extremist" or not. Forum 18 received no reply.

"Anti-missionary" prosecutions

Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") and Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity") is also used to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in occupied parts of Ukraine.

Following repeated raids on his unregistered Council of Churches Baptist congregation, on 27 April 2024, the Russian-controlled Krasnodon Town Court in occupied Luhansk Region fined Pastor Vladimir Rytikov 5,000 Russian Roubles for a meeting for worship of his unregistered Baptist congregation in January 2024 at which he was not present. "This is half my [monthly] pension," he noted. On 11 June 2024, Luhansk Supreme Court upheld the fine.

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne], just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia, has met in the same location since 1961. The Church has been led for some years by Pastor Vladimir Rytikov.

Pastor Rytikov is a former prisoner of conscience who was jailed by the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1982 to punish his involvement in a Christian children's summer camp. The Soviet authorities also jailed his father Pavel Rytikov for more than 10 years to punish his exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

The head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergey Krupa – who had signed the order to hand the case to court - refused to explain to Forum 18 in April 2024 why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home.

On 22 August 2024, Krasnodon Court Bailiff Lieutenant Natalya Gavran drew up a further record of an offence. Gavran issued Pastor Rytikov a summary fine of 10,000 Russian Roubles, representing about one month's pension. He had failed to pay within the stipulated 60 days the fine handed down in April 2024. "Each time they double the amount," local Baptists told Forum 18. Pastor Rytikov has not paid the latest fine either.

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 two priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), 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.

The Russian occupation authorities also use Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26 to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in occupied Crimea. Many of those targeted are Muslims who lead prayers in mosques. On 16 June 2022 Dzhankoi District Court rejected Emir Medzhitov's appeal against a fine of three weeks' average local wages for leading Friday prayers in a mosque.

His public defender Aider Suleimanov insisted that the prosecution had not proved that Medzhitov had conducted the "missionary activity" for which he was punished. "It turns out that Emir was punished simply for conducting communal prayers," Suleimanov stated. Dzhankoi District Prosecutor's Office official Natalya Tishchenko – who led the case in court – put the phone down when Forum 18 asked why the Prosecutor's Office had opened a case against Medzhitov at the instigation of Russia's FSB security service, and why he had been prosecuted and punished for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Religious communities are also prosecuted under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 3 ("Implementation of activities by

a religious organisation without indicating its official full name, including the issuing or distribution, within the framework of missionary activity, of literature and printed, audio, and video material without a label bearing this name, or with an incomplete or deliberately false label").

The "Local Religious Organisation Synagogue of Messianic Jews 'Havah Nagilah' in Yevpatoriya" was in 2022 fined for missing out the word "in" on Facebook videos. In another example, Dmitry Pikhanov of Krasnoperekopsk Prosecutor's Office refused to discuss why he had called for Christ's Love Pentecostal Church to be fined or who suffered because it failed to give its full legal name on its social media page. Similarly, Yalta's Catholic priest, Fr Tomasz Wytrwal, was fined one month's average wage on 5 August 2022 for his parish's failure to use its full official name on material it had produced.

Disinformation

Russian occupation forces and Russian state media often broadcast disinformation about religious believers and communities in occupied Ukraine which do not support the renewed invasion.

In one of many examples, on 1 October 2023 the state-owned Rossiya-1 television channel in Moscow broadcast a 10-minute film from occupied parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. The film attacked the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses and repeated some of the many disinformation messages used by Russian official commentators and state media. Yelena Yerofeyeva claimed that under Ukrainian rule "in Berdyansk alone there were 36 odious sects", while in Melitopol there were "even more".

Berdyansk's Catholic priest "fled abroad", Yerofeyeva falsely claimed. In reality, Fr Mateusz Godek told Forum 18 that he was not in the city at the time of the February 2022 Russian invasion, and has not been able to return to Berdyansk because of the invasion. "For eight years in this Catholic church they educated Nazis," Yerofeyeva also claimed without any evidence.

Immediately after the Rossiya-1 film showed footage of Berdyansk's Catholic Church, Moscow Patriarchate Bishop Luka (Volchkov), administrator of Berdyansk's Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Diocese claimed to Yerofeyeva: "They created there an entire Hitler Jugend." Luka produced no evidence for his claim.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Religious Organisations Department at Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration's Social and Political Communications and Information Policy Department, defended Yerofeyeva's claims and his contribution to her 10 minute film. He insisted to Forum 18 on 12 October 2023 that all the accusations against the religious communities she mentioned are true. The switchboard at Rossiya-1 TV in Moscow refused the same day to put Forum 18 through to Yerofeyeva.

In 2018, Estonia banned Yerofeyeva and another Rossiya-1 TV journalist from entering the Schengen Area for five years "for ridiculing Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious group and inciting hatred towards them". The two Rossiya-1 employees used hidden cameras and concealed the real purpose of their visit. The Estonian Internal Security Service (KAPO) noted in its Annual Review 2018 (https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Annual%20Review%202018.pdf) that Yerofeyeva and her colleague's actions "have the characteristics of religious discrimination against persons, which in turn may develop into incitement of hatred as defined in Section 151 of the Estonian Penal Code".

Ending human rights violations

Russia's rulers have not faced free and fair elections by the people they rule within Russia's internationally-recognised borders, as human rights defenders the Movement for Defence of Voters' Rights Golos (<https://golosinfo.org/en>) (the only independent nationwide Russian election observation movement that now has to function without legal status after its enforced liquidation) and European human rights defenders Russian Election Monitor (<https://www.russian-election-monitor.org/>) have documented. This leads to serious human rights violations within Russia (<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/russia>), including punishing Russians who protest for religious and other reasons against the invasion and occupation of Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

The fundamental cause of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights violations in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>) is Russia's invasion and occupation from 2014 onwards. Until Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory is ended, the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights violations seem set to continue. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Occupied Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>)

Previous Forum 18 Occupied Ukraine religious freedom surveys (<https://www.forum18.org/analyses.php?region=17>)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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