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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Missionary" fines, "so-called religious services"

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

A court in the Russian-occupied city of Donetsk fined Pastor Vladimir Rudomyotkin several days' average local wage on 23 May for alleged missionary activity. His Council of Churches Baptist congregation meets without seeking permission from officials. Two days earlier, another Donetsk court punished St Joseph Roman Catholic parish for allegedly failing to give its official full name "within the framework of missionary activity". An Enerhodar court fined an individual 3 weeks' average local wage for organising a community "where so-called religious services were held on Sundays".

On 23 May, the Russian-controlled Budennovsk Inter-District Court in the occupied Ukrainian city of Donetsk fined Pastor Vladimir Rudomyotkin several days' average local wage for allegedly conducting missionary activity. He leads a Council of Churches Baptist congregation which meets without seeking permission from officials. Church members came to the court to support their pastor.

Telephones went unanswered at Budennovsk Inter-District Court each time Forum 18 called (see below).

This is the latest of multiple punishments imposed by Russia on individuals and communities in occupied Ukraine under Russia's Administrative Code for alleged "missionary activity" (see below).

On 21 May, Donetsk's Russian-controlled Voroshilov Inter-District Court punished the city's St Joseph Roman Catholic parish for allegedly failing to give its official full name "within the framework of missionary activity". Fines are typically handed down when a community fails to give its full official name on notices outside its place of worship or on literature it produces or distributes. The parish is unable to have a resident priest and relies for Mass on visiting priests from Russia (see below).

A Judge at the same court punished the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community for the same "offence" on 13 March. The community is now being officially liquidated (see below).

Telephones went unanswered at Voroshilov Inter-District Court each time Forum 18 called (see below).

An official of the department that registers religious communities at the Russian-controlled Donetsk Justice Department refused to discuss the liquidation of the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community or anything else. "This is a state secret," the official told Forum 18. "I don't have the right to give information to anyone except to the leader of the organisation" (see below).

On Sunday 16 February, an officer of the Russian-controlled police in Pervomaisk (official Ukrainian name Sokolohirsk) in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, drew up a record of an offence in relation to visiting Russian citizen Nikolai Galashev. He was accused under Article 5.26, Part 4 of Russia's Administrative Code ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). A local court approved the transfer of the case to Galashev's home region of Arkhangelsk in Russia (see below).

In March, Russian officials inspected the activity of a religious community in Enerhodar in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region. The officials said they found an individual, identified only as S., conducting "illegal" missionary activity. The Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court claimed that the individual "organised a parish of the given organisation where so-called religious services were held on Sundays". Enerhodar Town Court fined the individual about 3 weeks' average local wages (see below).

Tight Russian controls

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

Russian occupation officials treat all Ukrainian religious communities which have not received Russian state registration as illegal

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890). They have repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902). Religious leaders have been expelled from Russian-occupied territory.

Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov – who served a Ukrainian Orthodox parish in Tokmak in Russian-occupied Ukraine – arrived in February at a strict regime labour camp (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2962) in Russia's Saratov Region. In August 2024, the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court – at a closed trial held at the Russian-controlled Crimean Supreme Court in Simferopol – jailed him for 14 years in a strict regime labour camp on charges of "espionage".

Russian-controlled courts have imposed multiple punishments on individuals and communities in occupied Ukraine under Russia's Administrative Code for alleged "missionary activity" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963).

Restricting, seizing places of worship, checking sermons

On 27 March, the Russian-controlled Melitopol Inter-District Court in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region ordered the Council of Churches Baptist congregation to notify the Russian authorities of its existence in accordance with Russian law. Its pastor, Dmitry Malakhov, who has faced repeated court cases, is challenging this demand (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981).

On 30 May, Russian-controlled police raided the Council of Churches Baptist church in Luhansk's Artyomovsky District and threatened to close it (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981).

The Russian occupation authorities have been confiscating property owned by Ukrainian individuals or organisations that they deem "ownerless". Among them have been places of worship already seized from religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981), especially those the Russian regime does not like.

In late April, Russian security officials reportedly visited at least one church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2982) in the Russian-occupied part of Kherson Region to check what priests say in their sermons.

Donetsk: Court fines Council of Churches Baptist pastor

On 18 April, officials prepared an administrative case against Pastor Vladimir Rudomyotkin. He leads a Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the Russian-occupied Donetsk. He was accused under Article 5.26, Part 4 of Russia's Administrative Code ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). This carries a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

Prosecutor's Office and other officials had arrived during the Sunday meeting for worship on 13 April, a week before Easter, when the church was celebrating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. They did not halt the service, but asked questions of church members, local Baptists told Forum 18.

On 30 April, the case was handed to Donetsk's Russian-controlled Budennovsk Inter-District Court, where the case was assigned to Judge Mariya Gulyayeva. At a hearing on 15 May, she postponed the case, demanding more information on the case. At a further hearing on 23 May, she fined Pastor Rudomyotkin 5,000 Russian Roubles (several days' average local wage), but delayed issuing the full decision in writing until 27 May, according to court records.

Telephones went unanswered at Budennovsk Inter-District Court each time Forum 18 called on 3 June.

About a dozen church members came to the court for the 15 May hearing to support their pastor. They greeted him and his wife with flowers, church members noted on 17 May.

Donetsk: Court punishes Roman Catholic parish

On 28 April, an administrative case reached Donetsk's Russian-controlled Voroshilov Inter-District Court against the city's St Joseph Roman Catholic parish.

The parish was accused under Article 5.26, Part 3 of Russia's Administrative Code ("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"). This incurs a fine of 30,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles and the confiscation of any literature or other material. Fines are typically handed down when a community fails to give its full official name on notices outside its place of worship or on literature it produces or distributes.

On 30 April, Judge Dmitry Sharanov sent the case back as the documents had been prepared "by an unauthorised person", according to court records.

The case against the Catholic parish was returned to Voroshilov Inter-District Court on 21 May. On 29 May Judge Sergey Krylovsky ruled that the parish violated Article 5.26, Part 3 and handed down a punishment.

A Judge at the same court punished the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2970) for the same "offence" on 13 March. The process to liquidate the community's legal status under Russian law began on 10 April, according to Russian tax records.

Telephones went unanswered at Voroshilov Inter-District Court each time Forum 18 called on 3 June.

An official of the department that registers religious communities at the Russian-controlled Donetsk Justice Department refused to discuss the liquidation of the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community or anything else. "This is a state secret," the official – who gave her name only as Irina Anatolyevna – told Forum 18 on 4 June. "I don't have the right to give information to anyone except to the leader of the organisation."

Two Catholic parishes have Russian registration in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine's Donetsk Region, St Joseph Roman Catholic parish and Transfiguration of the Saviour Greek Catholic parish, according to Russian tax records.

However, the Roman Catholic parish has no resident priest. Two priests from Russia – Fr Denis Marchishin from St Petersburg and Fr Vyacheslav Gorokhov from Moscow – visited to lead worship in the Donetsk and Makeevka parishes in Holy Week and on Easter Sunday, 20 April. Services at the parishes in Russian-occupied parts of Donetsk Region - as well as those in neighbouring Luhansk Region - have to be led by laypeople in the absence of resident priests.

Luhansk Region: Police case against Russian visitor for "missionary activity"

On Sunday 16 February, S. Titov, an officer of the Russian-controlled police in Pervomaisk (official Ukrainian name Sokolohirsk) in the west of Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, drew up a record of an offence in relation to visiting Russian citizen Nikolai Galashev. He was accused under Article 5.26, Part 4 of Russia's Administrative Code ("Russians conducting missionary activity").

Telephones at the Russian-controlled Pervomaisk District Police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 4 June.

The case was handed to the Russian-controlled Stakhanov Town Court. However, at Galashev's request, the court transferred the case to the court in his home town of Koryazhma in Arkhangelsk Region of northern Russia, where it arrived on 24 April, according to court records. (Russian law allows administrative cases to be transferred to a court in the place where an individual lives.) Koryazhma Town Court transferred the case to a local magistrate's court, but this does not list it.

Court records do not indicate which community Galashev belongs to.

Enerhodar: "Missionary" fine for "so-called religious services" follows inspection

In March, Russian officials inspected the activity of a religious community in Enerhodar in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region. The officials said they found an individual, identified only as S., conducting "illegal" missionary activity.

A 23 April statement by the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Court claimed that the individual "organised a parish of the given organisation where so-called religious services were held on Sundays". It added that a notice on the entrance to the building gave the name of the organisation and the times of services. It did not identify the community but claimed that it had been banned in Russia.

The Court statement claimed that the community had violated Russia's Religion Law and had not held a meeting to empower the individual to act as a missionary. Nor had it informed the Russian authorities of its creation and functioning as a religious group.

The statement also claimed that the individual was collecting tithes from community members. The individual sent a tenth of the money collected to the organisation's headquarters in the United States while the rest was used for the needs of the community and charitable activity.

A case was brought against the individual under Article 5.26, Part 4 of Russia's Administrative Code ("Russians conducting missionary activity").

A Judge at the Russian-controlled Enerhodar Town Court found the individual guilty and handed down a fine of 40,000 Russian Roubles. This represents about 3 weeks' average local wages.

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 3 and 4 June. (END)

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

For background information, see Forum 18's Occupied Ukraine religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963)

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