

12 April 2024

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Deported priests now in Ukraine

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

In February and March, Russia illegally deported two Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priests - Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui – to Georgia. Both priests were arrested and fined by occupation forces in September 2023, and then illegally taken to Russia. Elsewhere in occupied Ukraine, after an armed raid on the Sunday morning worship meeting of Krasnodon's Council of Churches Baptist congregation, Baptist Pastor and Soviet-era prisoner of conscience Vladimir Rytikov faces illegal Russian charges of "conducting missionary activity".

Russian occupation forces arrested and fined Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priests Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui in the occupied Donetsk Region in September 2023. They then illegally transferred them to Russia in October. This year, they illegally deported both priests from Russia. Fr Khristofor was deported to Georgia in February 2024, and Fr Andri was deported to Georgia in March. Both priests are now in Ukrainian government-held Ukraine.

When Forum 18 asked Russian court Bailiff Aleksandr Nikolenko why Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri could not have returned to their homes in the Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, he replied: "Because they were ordered to leave the Russian Federation" (see below).

A Russian occupation forces' court in Donetsk Region had illegally found both priests guilty of "illegal missionary activity" in September 2023 under Russian law, fined them, and ordered their deportation from the Russian Federation (see below).

Russia against international law imposes its own laws on the occupied Ukrainian territories it controls and illegally claims to have annexed (see below).

Russian occupation officials had tried to pressure both OCU priests Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri – as also other priests of both the OCU and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) - to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church. Multiple religious leaders from various religious communities under Russian occupation have been killed, tortured, and disappeared by the occupation forces (see below).

Elsewhere in occupied Ukraine, on 28 January 2024 armed men raided the Sunday morning worship service of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region (see below).

On 29 March, Russian-controlled Krasnodon Police officer Sergei Vakhny prepared the record of an offence against Baptist Pastor and Soviet-era prisoner of conscience Vladimir Rytikov. It notes that he was found leading the 28 January meeting. The police illegally accused him of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). Police handed the case to Krasnodon Town Court (see below).

As of 12 April, the Russian occupation forces' Krasnodon Town Court has not yet listed a hearing in Pastor Rytikov's case. "They're silent for now," a local Baptist told Forum 18 (see below).

The head of Krasnodon's occupation police, Colonel Sergei Krupa, refused to explain to Forum 18 why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home. "I won't give any comments by phone," he told Forum 18, and then put the phone down (see below).

Pastor Rytikov's congregation has met in the same location since 1961, and he was fined in 2018 and 2019 for leading unregistered worship meetings. In 2020, Russian occupation officials threatened him with "extremism" criminal charges for refusing to stop leading his congregation (see below).

Illegal trials, transfers to Russia, deportations

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>). Russia's illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) are not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

Russian occupation forces in Ukraine including Donetsk - which Russia illegally claimed to have annexed in 2022 – began imposing punishments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) under Russia's Criminal and Administrative Codes in late 2022 in courts which Russia controls.

More than 10 months after the Russian occupation forces in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region disappeared Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov, the occupation forces' Regional Prosecutor's Office announced in March 2024 that he is facing criminal trial (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) for alleged "espionage". If convicted, the 40-year-old priest faces a prison term of 10 to 12 years.

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."

Two Donetsk OCU priests deported to Georgia

Russia has deported two Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priests from occupied Donetsk Region - Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui – sending both to Georgia.

On 17 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, and the following day seized Fr Andri. On 22 September, a local court fined both priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869) (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 then illegally transferred Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to Russia's Rostov Region, where they were held in the Deportation Centre in the village of Sinyavskoe in Neklinovsky District. Bailiff Aleksandr Nikolenko told Forum 18 in January (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2886) that the priests refused deportation via Latvia as they want to live in Donetsk. "If they took Russian citizenship, they could return to Donetsk, but they can't do so as citizens of another state."

"We had an instruction to deport them to Georgia," Bailiff Nikolenko, who handled the priests' deportation case at Rostov Region Court Bailiffs Service, told Forum 18 from the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don on 12 April 2024. He refused to say who the instruction had been from. He claimed that the priests had agreed to being sent to Georgia.

When Forum 18 asked Bailiff Nikolenko why Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri could not have returned to their homes in the Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, he responded: "Because they were ordered to leave the Russian Federation."

Fr Khristofor was deported by Russia to Georgia, his Bishop, Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) of Donetsk and Mariupol announced on 21 February 2024. On 27 February, the head of the OCU Metropolitan Epifany met Fr Khristofor and Metropolitan Serhy in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, the OCU noted on its website the same day.

Fr Andri was also deported by Russia to Georgia and "he is now safe", OCU Metropolitan Serhy announced on 27 March. On 4 April, OCU head Metropolitan Epifany met Fr Andri and Metropolitan Serhy in Kyiv, the OCU noted on its website the same day.

Russian occupation officials had tried to pressure Fr Khristofor and Fr Andri to transfer (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2886) from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) to the Russian Orthodox Church.

"Officials told them that if they renounce the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and repent of their affiliation with it on camera, and transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and undergo re-ordination, they would give them a good parish where they would enjoy a good standard of living," OCU Metropolitan Serhy (Horobtsov) told Forum 18 in January 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2886). Both priests refused.

Russian occupation forces have pressured priests and congregations of both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902). The occupation forces have also repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) they dislike.

Multiple religious leaders from various religious communities under Russian occupation have been killed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2893), tortured, and disappeared (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890) by the occupation forces.

Luhansk Baptist pastor faces illegal "missionary" charges in court

On 28 January, armed men raided the Sunday morning worship service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890) of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in the Russian-occupied Luhansk Region, just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia.

"They took out two of the elders, Vyacheslav Kollisnichenko and Mikhail Miknus," local Baptists noted on Telegram the same day (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890). "They're recording everything on camera! They're letting no one out. They're writing down the passport details of all those present."

The congregation – like other Council of Baptist churches – does not seek permission from the authorities to meet. Its place of worship is in a private home.

The armed men then released the two elders and allowed the meeting for worship to finish. They then took the home owner Yuliya Vitsenovskaya in a police car to the police station. Officials questioned Miknus and another church leader Oleg Vorotilin in the church room. All were allowed to go later in the day (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890). Officials later told church members to bring documents on ownership of the home on 30 January.

On 2 February, police came to the home of the church's Pastor, Vladimir Rytikov (who had not been present at the 28 January meeting for worship). They asked if he led the church and why it functions without registration. They also asked to see the church's statute. "I told them that our statute is the Gospel," Pastor Rytikov noted on 7 February. He told the officers that the church does not wish to seek registration. He refused to answer questions about other church members, insisting that he could speak only for himself.

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

On 29 March, Russian-controlled Krasnodon Police officer Sergei Vakhny prepared the record of offence against Pastor Rytikov (seen by Forum 18). The record of an offence notes that he was found leading a religious meeting at 12 noon on 28 January. Police illegally accuse him of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) ("Russians conducting missionary activity"), which carries a punishment for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

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

Also on 29 March, the head of the Russian Krasnodon police, Colonel Sergei Krupa, signed the order (seen by Forum 18) to hand the case to Krasnodon Town Court.

Pastor Rytikov received the case documents by post on 3 April. As of 12 April, the occupation forces' Krasnodon Town Court has not yet set a date for the hearing. "They're silent for now," a local Baptist told Forum 18 on 12 April.

Occupation police Colonel Krupa refused to explain to Forum 18 why police had brought the prosecution against Pastor Rytikov for a meeting of his church in a home. "I won't give any comments by phone," he told Forum 18 on 5 April, and then put the phone down.

Repeated pressure on Baptist congregation

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] has met in the same location since 1961. The Church has been led for some years by Pastor Vladimir Rytikov.

The Soviet authorities jailed Vladimir Rytikov from 1979 to 1982 to punish his involvement in a Christian children's summer camp. They also jailed his father Pavel Rytikov, who spent more than a decade behind bars in the Soviet Union to punish his exercise of freedom of religion and belief.

The now 64-year-old Pastor Rytikov and the Krasnodon Baptist congregation have faced repeated pressure from Russian occupation forces in recent years.

After a June 2018 police raid on Sunday worship, the then Krasnodon Town and District Court fined Pastor Rytikov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401). The same court fined him again (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539) in June 2019 for leading worship meetings without permission. Following an August 2019 police raid on Sunday worship, the same court fined Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531).

In January 2020, officers of the then State Security Ministry of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic threatened Pastor Rytikov with criminal charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539) of "extremism" for refusing to stop leading his congregation. (END)

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