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DONBAS: Luhansk: Soviet-era prisoner of conscience to be jailed again?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Officers of the State Security Ministry of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic threatened Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – with an "extremism" criminal prosecution if he continues to lead worship without official permission. Prosecutors are still investigating Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest Anatoli Nazarenko on "extremism" charges.

Officers of the State Security Ministry of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine have threatened a Baptist pastor in the town of Krasnodon with criminal charges of "extremism" for refusing to halt his leadership of his congregation. Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – faced repeated administrative prosecution in 2018 and 2019.

The man who answered the phone at the State Security Ministry branch in Krasnodon refused to say if he was from the secret police or explain why the Ministry is considering bringing "extremism" criminal charges against Pastor Rytikov. The duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Luhansk refused to put Forum 18 through to anyone to discuss the case (see below).

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, stressed to Forum 18 that "we're not threatening" Pastor Rytikov (see below).

Pastor Rytikov, who is 60, leads 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. Like all Council of Churches congregations it does not seek official registration (see below).

The rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist". The 26 November 2019 ban came a week after Luhansk's Supreme Court overturned part of a lower court decision that Christian books seized from Pastor Rytikov should be destroyed. The Supreme Court left unchanged the pastor's fine of more than a month's average local wage (see below).

Prosecutors are still investigating the "extremism" case against Fr Anatoli Nazarenko, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. "No one is inviting him [for interrogation], but the investigation is continuing," local church members confirmed to Forum 18 in early February (see below).

Pro-Russian rebels seized parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region in March 2014 and the following month proclaimed what they called the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), which is internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which in January 2020 controls about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region, has declared a state of martial law.

Pro-Russian rebels similarly seized parts of Ukraine's Donetsk Region in April 2014 and proclaimed what they called the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), which is also internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration in January 2020 controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

"Illegal" religious communities

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not undergone local registration are illegal. They point to a May 2015 Decree by Igor Plotnitsky, the then Head of the unrecognised entity, banning mass events while the area was under martial law (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401), and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council.

The Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for state permission to exist (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425), and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine – the successor of the Kiev Patriarchate – has not applied for registration for its Luhansk cathedral and another parish in the rebel-controlled territory.

Council of Churches Baptists do not seek registration on principle as they see this as leading to state interference and are therefore regarded as "illegal". (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425) This is despite – as the Baptists have noted – the local Religion Law stating in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

Jehovah's Witnesses also did not apply for state permission to exist, pointing out that "the registration procedure implies the revealing of personal information on the worshippers who could easily become new targets".

The Religion Law also bans all exercise of freedom of religion and belief without the permission of the authorities. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425)

No Protestant community received state permission to exist. Following this, "with great pain" Seventh-day Adventist communities reluctantly decided to halt all their activities to avoid "provoking unpleasantness" and the seizure of church property, including musical instruments and communion vessels. In September 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned.

In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or face punishment (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462). "Officials earlier didn't insist that our churches should not meet for worship," Pastor Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18. "But they have now sent a clear message that they will not tolerate such meetings for worship any more". The Baptist Union reluctantly decided that its congregations could no longer meet publicly for services after the last Sunday worship on 10 March 2019.

The rebel authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities feeling isolated.

Soviet-era prisoner of conscience

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.

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.

Raids, property seizures, fines, book bans

The Krasnodon Baptist congregation is among Protestant communities to have faced increased harassment since the rebels took control of parts of Luhansk Region in 2014.

Officials raided the church's regular Sunday meeting for worship in June 2018 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401). Pastor Rytikov refused to pay a fine of 8,000 Russian Roubles (about five weeks' average wages for those in formal work) handed down in July 2018 to punish him for leading an unapproved worship meeting.

In September 2018, court bailiffs opened proceedings to recover the money for the unpaid fine (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). In October 2018, they came to Pastor Rytikov's home in Krasnodon and summoned him to court that day. There, he told Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh that he had no intention of paying the fine because he does not regard himself as guilty of any wrongdoing.

Judge Kudrevatykh found him guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.26, Part 1 of failing to pay the fine. She handed him an additional punishment of 20 hours' community service (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). Pastor Rytikov appealed against this extra punishment to the LPR Supreme Court in Luhansk. On 14 November 2018, the court overturned the community service punishment. However, the July 2018 fine remained in force. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462)

In November 2018, court bailiffs came to Pastor Rytikov's home, going through all the rooms, recording what property he had and taking photographs (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462). In March 2019, court bailiffs again raided his home, accompanied by two police officers and two official witnesses. Not finding the car they had hoped to seize, they seized a bread maker and music centre.

In April 2019, police raided the Sunday worship meeting of the Krasnodon Church. They took Pastor Rytikov and two other leaders to the police station, where they fingerprinted, photographed and interrogated them

(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). In June 2019, Krasnodon Town and District Court again fined Pastor Rytikov for leading unregistered worship.

Following an August 2019 police raid on Sunday worship, Krasnodon court fined one of Pastor Rytikov's colleagues, Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)

The rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). The 26 November 2019 ban was made public on 12 December 2019, when the Justice Ministry published a list of the banned books on its website. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)

The ban came a week after Luhansk's Supreme Court overturned part of a lower court decision that Christian books seized from Pastor Rytikov should be destroyed. The Supreme Court left unchanged the pastor's fine of more than a month's average local wage.

As well as the Gospel of John, the banned "extremist" books also contain the main hymnbook used by the Council of Churches Baptists, "Songs of Revival", as well as their regular magazine and children's books. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)

Yelena Tsvetkova, the head of the Registration Department at the Justice Ministry, told Forum 18 in December 2019 that the government banning decision was not public (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531). She insisted that all was in accordance with the law.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, dismissed reports that the government had banned 12 Baptist books, including the Gospel of John. Told that the list is on the Justice Ministry website, she told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020: "Anything can be put on a website. In any case, it is a different Ministry."

Secret police interrogation, threats

Officers of the LPR State Security Ministry arrived at the home of Pastor Vladimir Rytikov in the town of Krasnodon at about 5 pm on 28 January 2020, local Baptists told Forum 18. They took him to the Ministry branch in Krasnodon for questioning. "They told my wife not to worry and not to tell anyone, and they promised to bring me back home in half an hour," Pastor Rytikov noted.

"You've been brought to administrative responsibility for conducting worship services without registration?" officers asked Pastor Rytikov. He responded that he had.

"Are you continuing to gather?" officers asked him. He responded that they do. "Are you going to gather in future?" they asked. Pastor Rytikov said that they would.

Officers put other questions to him about his religious activity. "They then read me a warning that I am conducting extremist activity – that I incite people in sermons to extremism – and that I distribute extremist literature," Pastor Rytikov noted. "If that continues they'll bring me to criminal responsibility under Article 340.

Criminal Code Article 340 punishes "Public calls to carry out extremist activity" with, in Part 1, fines of 100 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage or an individual's income for between one and two years, or forced labour for up to three years or imprisonment of up to four years. Part 2 punishes the same actions with use of the media, telecommunications or the internet, with forced labour of up to five years or up to five years' imprisonment.

State Security officers also told Pastor Rytikov that a special commission which examined religious literature seized from him had ruled that it was "extremist".

The man who answered the phone on 4 February at the State Security Ministry branch in Krasnodon refused to say if he was from the secret police or explain why the Ministry is considering bringing "extremism" criminal charges against Pastor Rytikov. The duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Luhansk refused to put Forum 18 through to anyone to discuss the case.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, stressed to Forum 18 on 4 February that "we're not threatening" Pastor Rytikov.

Pastor Rytikov adamantly rejects the accusations of "extremism". Neither at worship services, nor in our literature is there anything extremist," he insisted. "If the Word of God – the Gospel of John indeed – is deemed an extremist book, this represents a rebellion against God himself and everything sacred!"

Other "extremism" prosecution threats

In April 2019 anti-"extremism" police raided and searched the Holy Trinity Cathedral and diocesan offices (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the city of Luhansk.

An officer of the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime in Luhansk insisted that "there are no repressions". Andrei Litsoev, then head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry blamed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine itself for the raid. "They're guilty," he insisted to Forum 18 in April 2019. "It is not registered, so it doesn't exist. They can't conduct their activity. They show no desire to legalise their situation."

Litsoev did not explain how they could be registered when the Religion Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for state permission to exist. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425)

Officials then began investigating charges that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Luhansk was holding narcotics, then weapons, then "extremist" literature. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516) Officials forced the two priests - Fr Anatoli Nazarenko and Fr Gennady Kurganov – to sign statements that they would not leave rebel-held territory. This restriction was not continued for Fr Kurganov.

Police prepared an "extremism" criminal investigation against Fr Nazarenko which they then handed on to prosecutors. Banned from leaving rebel-held territory, this ban was lifted in September 2019 after five months. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516)

"A criminal case has not been opened, but the investigation has not been closed," one Orthodox Christian noted in October 2019 about the investigation into Fr Nazarenko (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516). "A commission is apparently still studying the case. Of course, the literature they claim to have seized had nothing to do with us."

Prosecutors are still investigating the "extremism" case against Fr Nazarenko. "No one is inviting him [for interrogation], but the investigation is continuing," local church members confirmed to Forum 18 in early February 2020. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Donbas (<http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=87>)

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