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DONBAS: Luhansk: Orthodox cathedral, more Protestant churches raided

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Officials of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic raided at least two Protestant Sunday worship meetings on 24 March. Courts chose not to punish two pastors. On 4 April anti-"extremism" police raided the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Holy Trinity Cathedral in Luhansk, diocesan offices and the homes of two priests. A police officer refused to say if further measures against the priests are planned.

Officers of the police anti-"extremism" department of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine searched Holy Trinity Cathedral and diocesan offices of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the city of Luhansk on 4 April. Officers also searched the homes of the diocesan secretary and another priest. Interrogations have continued since then.

An official of the police anti-"extremism" department, who gave his name only as Sergei, insisted to Forum 18 that the two priests are "at liberty" and are free to continue to conduct religious activity. He refused to say if any further measures will be taken against them (see below).

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine – the successor of the Kiev Patriarchate – chose not to seek registration for its Luhansk cathedral and another parish in rebel-held territory. Despite the raid and interrogations, it appears still to be allowed to hold services at its cathedral.

Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, blamed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine itself for its problems. "They're guilty," he insisted to Forum 18. "It is not registered, so it doesn't exist" (see below).

The Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate appears to function unimpeded in rebel-held territory.

The 4 April searches, confiscations and interrogations connected with Luhansk's Orthodox cathedral came just over a week after two more Protestant churches in the rebel-held area were on 24 March raided as they were meeting for Sunday worship (see below).

The latest raids on Protestant churches as they met for worship came two weeks after Baptist Union congregations held their last meetings for public worship. LPR officials threatened Baptist Union church leaders that they will not tolerate continued open public meetings for worship in the 48 Baptist Union congregations in rebel-held territory. Reluctantly, local church leaders therefore decided to from 17 March stop meetings for public worship. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462)

Two Protestant pastors – both pensioners - were brought to court (one following a 24 March raid, one following a February raid) for continuing to exercise freedom of religion or belief by leading "illegal worship". Neither pastor was given a formal legal punishment (see below).

The rebel LPR authorities have banned all exercise of freedom of religion or belief by communities that did not gain registration with their Justice Ministry by the extended deadline of 15 October 2018. Those rejected include all Protestant communities. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462)

Litsoev of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry claimed that all the communities that lodged applications received registration. Asked about all the Protestant communities that have been rejected, he responded: "All that lodged applications in time" (see below).

Communities which did not apply for state permission to exist, such as Jehovah's Witnesses (who knew they would not be accepted), the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and Council of Churches Baptists (who choose not to seek registration on principle), are also regarded as "illegal".

Cathedral, diocesan offices, homes searched

Trouble began for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's community in the city of Luhansk in late March, when a group of people – who later turned out to be from the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime – came to inspect Holy Trinity Cathedral. They spent several hours there and the following day invited Fr Anatoli Nazarenko, the secretary of the Luhansk and Starobilsk diocese, for questioning.

That questioning lasted for about five hours and appeared to end amicably, Radio Free Europe's Donbas.Realii noted on 9 April. Officers shook the priest by the hand and assured him that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine would not come to any harm.

At 10 am on 4 April, officers of the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime returned to the cathedral, where a baptism was underway. A woman in a black scarf rang the doorbell and asked for Fr Nazarenko. When he opened the gate the officers rushed in, a church member told Donbas.Realii on 9 April.

Officers took the keys from Fr Nazarenko and then searched not only the cathedral but the diocesan offices. The officers filmed the search. "They conducted the searches without a search warrant," Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk (who is based in the Ukrainian government controlled part of Luhansk Region) told Forum 18 on 9 April.

About 20 officers searched the cathedral and diocesan offices until the evening, the church member told Donbas.Realii. They seized 54 religious books as well as books on Ukrainian themes. They also seized computers and Church correspondence, as well as notarised copies of the documents relating to the purchase of the land where the cathedral was built in 2013.

Fr Nazarenko was forced to write a statement under scrutiny from two officers of the Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime. Another priest who also serves at the cathedral, Fr Gennady Kurganov, was also ordered to write a statement. Similarly, the church member was forced to write a statement about "who I am, and what I do in the church".

At Fr Nazarenko's request, officers allowed the church member to leave at about 2.30 pm, as she had to go back to her sick husband. Officers held the 72-year-old Fr Nazarenko and Fr Kurganov until 9 pm.

That same day, officers search both Fr Nazarenko's and Fr Kurganov's homes.

Fr Nazarenko and Fr Kurganov were repeatedly summoned for questioning over the following days. Officers told both verbally not to leave the area while the investigation proceeds.

Fr Nazarenko was expecting to face further questioning on 8 April, but no one came for him. Instead he met officials of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) in Luhansk. OSCE representatives then visited the cathedral, Donbas.Realii added.

"The SMM is aware of such allegations and its monitoring officers on the ground are monitoring the situation," Dragana Nikolic-Solomon, the OSCE SMM's Spokesperson, told Forum 18 from Kiev on 10 April.

The church member present in the cathedral when the officers raided said she did not dare to ask them why they were conducting the operation. "We are doing nothing wrong," she told Donbas.Realii. "We just pray."

Orthodox themselves to blame for raids, confiscations?

An official of the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime in Luhansk, who gave his name only as Sergei, insisted that the two Orthodox priests are "at liberty" and are free to continue to conduct religious activity. "There are no repressions," he claimed to Forum 18 on 9 April. He refused to say if any further measures will be taken against the two priests.

Asked if officials are restricting the movements of the two priests, Sergei initially claimed they could go where they liked. Asked if that meant they could travel to Moscow, Kiev or Riga if they wished to, he appeared to get angry. "You've been given false information," he claimed. "We won't talk to you again." He then put the phone down.

Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, blamed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine itself for its problems. "They're guilty," he insisted to Forum 18 from Luhansk on 10 April. "It is not registered, so it doesn't exist. They can't conduct their activity. They show no desire to legalise their situation."

Asked why the police Department that combats extremism and organised crime conducted the raids and interrogations, Litsoev said that was not a question for him.

Litsoev claimed that all religious communities which applied for registration passed through the "expert analysis" procedure successfully and gained registration. Asked why none of the Protestant communities which lodged registration applications received it, he responded: "All that lodged applications in time."

Litsoev then said he was too busy to answer further questions and put the phone down. Forum 18 was therefore unable to ask why the LPR authorities insist that individuals and communities cannot meet with others to exercise freedom of religion or belief without registration.

Acquittal

At a final hearing on 21 March, a court in the city of Luhansk acquitted 82-year-old Protestant pastor Anatoly Tolstenko on charges of "illegal worship" and storing religious literature which the authorities regarded as "extremist". The judge ruled that he had committed no wrongdoing.

About 10 masked and armed LPR fighters raided a worship meeting in February of Path of Salvation Baptist church in Luhansk (which is not a community of the Baptist Union). They accused Pastor Tolstenko of leading "illegal worship".

During a search, the men seized books which the authorities of the unrecognised entity have banned as "extremist", including Jehovah's Witness publications. Friends of the community insist the armed fighters planted the books.
(http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462)

Raids, another court case

Officials of the rebel authorities raided at least two Protestant communities as they met for Sunday worship on 24 March, Sergei Kosyak, a Protestant pastor and former resident of Donetsk, told Forum 18.

One of the known 24 March raids was on a Protestant community in the town of Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk], less than 15 kms (10 miles) from the border with Russia. About 10 officers arrived, but did not halt the service. "The officers behaved more than correctly," Kosyak told Forum 18.

Afterwards the officers insisted that Pastor Nikolai Muratov should accompany them to the State Security Ministry. The church's deacon accompanied the pastor. There the secret police questioned them for an hour and a half. They had to sign pledges not to leave the area. The following day the police questioned Pastor Muratov.

On 27 March, Pastor Muratov – who is in his seventies - was summoned to a hearing at Sverdlovsk City and District Court. However, the Judge decided not to punish Pastor Muratov.

An official of the chancellery of Sverdlovsk City and District Court refused absolutely to give Forum 18 any information about the case on 9 April.

Forum 18 was unable to reach either the branch of the State Security Ministry in Sverdlovsk or the town police. (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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