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DONBAS: Luhansk: Gospel of John, Baptist books banned

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic banned 12 Baptist books as "extremist", including an edition of the Gospel of John in the widely-used Russian Synodal translation. Officials refused to say why the books are "extremist" and what will happen to those found with them. The ban came a week after the Supreme Court overturned a court order to destroy seized Baptist books.

The authorities of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine have banned 12 Baptist books – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist". The 26 November ban came a week after Luhansk's Supreme Court overturned part of a lower court decision that Christian books seized from a Baptist pastor 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 (see below).

It remains unclear what will happen in Churches which, for example, might read out the first verses of the Gospel of John from the Synodal Russian translation during Christmas services.

The 26 November government decision banning the 12 Baptist books became known on 10 December, when the Justice Ministry's State List of Extremist Materials was published on its website. The decision itself has not been published, with one government official describing it as a "secret document for official use and for limited distribution". It remains unclear therefore why such books are regarded as "extremist" and who made this decision (see below).

Justice Ministry officials in Luhansk refused to tell Forum 18 who initiated the ban and why, insisting that it was "in accordance with the law" (see below).

No official was prepared to explain what would happen to those found by police or state security officers to have copies of the banned Christian books. "Ask the security agencies," a Justice Ministry official told Forum 18. "Our job is only to manage the list." The duty officer at the State Security Ministry said "it is difficult to say what will happen" to those found in possession of any of these books (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). Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which currently 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). Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration currently controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

Worship meetings banned or restricted

The internationally unrecognised authorities of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in 2018 banned all exercise of freedom of religion and belief without the permission of the authorities. 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 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). In September 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425). In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or be punished. "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" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2462).

"We don't have closed communities. Everything here is good. We have received no complaints", an official told Forum 18 in

October 2019 (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516).

As is their right under international human rights law (<http://www.osce.org/odihr/139046>), all Council of Churches Baptist congregations (who are not part of Baptist Unions) in all territories they operate in refuse to apply for state permission to exist. The unrecognised LPR authorities' Religion Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for state permission to exist, 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. 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" (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425).

In March 2019 officials raided Protestant Sunday meetings for worship, and in April raided the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Holy Trinity Cathedral in Luhansk, diocesan offices, and the homes of two priests, taking priests away for interrogation (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467). Such raids have involved the planting by raiders of allegedly "extremist" material, as happened during a February 2019 raid on an independent Baptist Church (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2467). Throughout 2019, after raids Protestant pastors have been fined and had property confiscated for leading meetings for worship without state permission (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2514).

Meetings for worship without state permission remain banned in all Protestant churches and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls, and with no permanently resident priest Catholics hold Mass by Skype – meaning that they cannot receive communion, an essential part of the Mass. Rebels leaders have banned clergy from outside rebel-controlled territory from visiting their fellow believers, so many communities are isolated from their fellow believers (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2514).

12 "extremist" Christian books

In a 26 November government decision, 12 books published by the Khristianin publishing house run by the Council of Churches Baptists were banned as "extremist". The Justice Ministry then added the 12 books to the State List of Extremist Materials, which it published on its website on 10 December. The List now has 13 entries.

Of the 13 items on the List, the only other book formally declared "extremist" is a collection of songs by a Chechen composer.

The computer formatting of the list is very similar to the Republican List of Extremist Materials in the neighbouring rebel-held Donetsk People's Republic (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2428). As of 20 December, the Donetsk List contains 45 entries, including the Jehovah's Witness international website, many Jehovah's Witness publications, and several Muslim works. However, in Donetsk items are banned not by government decision but by the Supreme Court.

The 12 Baptist books banned as "extremist" in Luhansk include the Gospel of John. The Council of Churches Baptists use the 19th century Synodal translation of the Bible into Russian, which is widely used by other Christian Churches in the Russian-speaking world, including the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate and many Protestant Churches.

Other books on the List include the main hymnbook used by the Council of Churches Baptists, "Songs of Revival", as well as their regular magazine "Herald of Truth" and children's books.

The 26 November government decision banning the 12 books has not been published. An official of the government department handling citizens' calls – who did not give her name - told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 20 December that the decision is a "secret document for official use and for limited distribution". She refused to comment on the content, referring all questions to the Justice Ministry.

Yelena Tsvetkova, the head of the Registration Department at the Justice Ministry, said that the government banning decision is not public. She insisted to Forum 18 from Luhansk on 20 December that all is in accordance with the law. She cited the February 2018 Law on Countering Extremist Activity, which established the List.

The 2018 Law defines "extremist materials" as those calling for or justifying "extremist activity", including the works of leaders of the German Nazi party and the Italian fascist party, espousing ethnic or racial superiority, or justifying war crimes aiming to destroy all or part of an ethnic, social, racial or religious group.

Tsvetkova was unable to say in which category officials have placed the 12 Baptist books. She declined to discuss why the Gospel of John – as part of the Christian Bible widely read in Christian worship meetings and privately – was banned as "extremist". It remains unclear what will happen in Churches which, for example, might read out the first verses of the Gospel of John during Christmas services.

Tsvetkova was also unable to say who had initiated the ban.

What punishment for those with banned Christian books?

Forum 18 was unable to find out from officials in Luhansk what will happen to individuals or communities found to be in possession of any of the 12 banned Christian books.

"Ask the security agencies," Yelena Tsvetkova of the Justice Ministry official told Forum 18. "Our job is only to manage the list."

The duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Luhansk said that the Acting State Security Minister, Anatoly Antonov, was not in the office. The duty officer – who did not give his name – told Forum 18 on 20 December that "it is difficult to say what will happen" to those found in possession of any of these books. The duty officer added that he could not say which department of the Ministry handles extremism issues. "You're asking too many questions," he added, and then put the phone down.

Officials at the Interior Ministry in Luhansk (which controls the police) referred Forum 18 to Aleksei Melnik, the head of the office of Interior Minister Igor Kornet. "Anyone who spreads extremist literature will be dealt with in accordance with the law," Melnik told Forum 18 on 20 December. "There is the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code."

Melnik refused to explain if anyone who possesses the Gospel of John in the Synodal translation will face prosecution or not. He then put the phone down.

Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 on 19 December that officials had told them of the ban on 12 of their publications, but had not told them what would happen to them if they are found to be in possession of any of them.

Literature destruction order overturned

On 18 November – just over a week before the government banned the 12 Baptist publications - Judge Oksana Solonichenko at the Supreme Court in Luhansk overturned part of a lower court decision ordering seized Christian books to be destroyed, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

On 4 August police raided the Sunday meeting for worship of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne], attended by about 40 people. Officials then brought charges against Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2514)

Krasnodon police initially considered launching a criminal case against Pastor Tatarenko under Article 253, Part 1 ("Hooliganism, i.e. a crude violation of public order expressed in open disrespect for society") and Article 252 ("Repeated violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets"). Both Articles prescribe punishments ranging from a fine to a maximum five-year prison term.

However, on 13 August police ruled that Pastor Tatarenko had not committed these "crimes" by leading a worship meeting. On 16 August, officers then initiated the case under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting gatherings, meetings, demonstrations, processions or pickets").

On 7 October, Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh of Krasnodon Town and District Court found Tatarenko guilty and fined him 7,000 Russian Roubles (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2516) (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble). This represents more than a month's average local wage for those in formal work. The Judge also ordered that 20 Christian books seized from Pastor Tatarenko be destroyed.

Judge Kudrevatykh's assistant refused to explain why the Judge had fined Pastor Tatarenko and others for exercising freedom of religion or belief and why the Judge had ordered his books destroyed. "Court decisions cannot be discussed," the assistant told Forum 18 on 20 December. "All was in accordance with the law." Told that the Supreme Court had overturned the book destruction order, the assistant responded: "The Supreme Court is responsible for its own decisions taken in accordance with the law."

Pastor Tatarenko appealed against the decision to the Supreme Court, calling for the fine to be cancelled and the books to be returned. In its 18 November decision, the Court left the fine of 7,000 Russian Roubles unchanged, but cancelled the order to destroy the 20 books, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. Judge Solonichenko ruled that the books - ordered destroyed by the lower court as "material evidence" - were unrelated to Pastor Tatarenko's case.

The Supreme Court decision notes that the Christian books had been "voluntarily" handed over by another local Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov on 9 August and had not been mentioned in the police report of the 4 August raid on the church meeting.

Local Baptists told Forum 18 on 19 December that Pastor Tatarenko is not intending to appeal further.

Baptists said the 20 seized Christian books have not been returned and officials have not told them what they intend to do with them. They insisted that Pastor Tatarenko will not pay the fine.

Council of Churches Baptists have adopted a policy of civil disobedience in all the countries where they operate, refusing to pay fines handed down to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

After Pastor Rytikov refused to pay a similar fine, the same Judge Kudrevatykh on 18 October ordered him to conduct 20 hours' community service.

On 7 November, in a separate case, Pastor Rytikov lodged a further appeal to the Supreme Court against a 20 June fine for leading worship, according to his appeal seen by Forum 18. He lost his first appeal at the Supreme Court on 21 October.

Baptists told Forum 18 that the last time police raided any of their communities was in August. (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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