

21 December 2022

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: One Berdyansk pastor and two priests in Russian detention

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

Armed Russian soldiers seized Pastor Serhiy Karpenko of Berdyansk's Vefil Church on 12 December. Russia's National Guard seized Berdyansk's two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests on 16 November. No news has been heard of any since. "Keep demanding the urgent release of our priests because of the threat to their life and health," says the Donetsk Exarchate. Forum 18 asked the Russian-installed Berdyansk police what it is doing to locate the three and find those who seized them. "We only give answers in response to an official request," it responded.

On 12 December, armed Russian soldiers broke into the home of Serhiy Karpenko, Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church in the Black Sea coastal town of Berdyansk (Zaporizhzhia Region). They took him away in an unknown direction. No news has been heard of him since. Troops of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests in the city on 16 November. The Donetsk Exarchate has had no news of them since.

Ironically, the Russian authorities registered Vefil Church under Russian law on 24 November, with Pastor Karpenko as leader. It is the only religious community in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region that the Russian occupation authorities have registered so far (see below).

Russia occupies about 70 percent of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Region. The Russians have established their regional headquarters in the city of Melitopol.

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has renewed its call for the release of its two priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, arrested more than a month ago in Berdyansk. "Keep demanding the urgent release of our priests because of the threat to their life and health," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia (see below).

After calls went unanswered, Forum 18 sent written questions to the Russian-installed police in Berdyansk, asking what the police are doing (if anything) to locate Pastor Karpenko, Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan and to find those who seized them. "We only give answers in response to an official request," Berdyansk police told Forum 18. Forum 18 repeated its questions, but has received no response (see below).

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss the cases of Pastor Karpenko, Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan. "We can't say anything about these cases," the duty officer, who did not give his name, told Forum 18. "We deal only with the civilian population." Told that Pastor Karpenko and the two priests are civilians, he refused to transfer the call and put the phone down.

Russian occupation forces have expelled a second Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest from Melitopol to Ukrainian government-held territory. Masked soldiers armed with automatic weapons seized Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz, priest of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church in Melitopol, on 2 December. After interrogating him for an hour, they took him to the edge of Russian-controlled territory and he had to walk across to the Ukrainian side. His expulsion came a week after the Russian forces expelled the city's other Greek Catholic priest (see below).

Fr Oleksandr says he wanted to remain to serve his flock in and around Melitopol. "Had I not been forcibly removed, I would have stayed there - that was my decision," he told the Church's television channel after reaching government-controlled territory (see below).

The head of the Religious Organisations Department of the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Administration, Artyom Shablai, has given a series of interviews to the Russian media attacking religious "sects". He particularly accused "neo-charismatics" and Jehovah's Witnesses of acting as spies for foreign intelligence services. Forum 18 was unable to reach Shablai at the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Administration in Melitopol (see below).

Berdiansk: Soldiers seize Protestant Pastor

On the morning of 12 December, armed Russian soldiers broke into the home of Serhiy Karpenko, Pastor of the Vefil (Bethel) Protestant Church in Berdiansk. They then took him away in an unknown direction, Berdiansk News Online (based in government-controlled territory) noted on its Telegram channel the same day. It added, citing local residents, that soldiers had also searched the Church and allegedly found Ukrainian symbols.

After calls went unanswered, Forum 18 sent written questions to the Russian-installed police in Berdiansk, asking what the police are doing (if anything) to locate Pastor Karpenko and to find those who seized him. "We only give answers in response to an official request," Berdiansk police told Forum 18 on 21 December. Forum 18 repeated its questions, but received no response by the end of the working day in Berdiansk of 21 December.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss the case of Pastor Karpenko (or of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan). "We can't say anything about these cases," the duty officer, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 21 December. "We deal only with the civilian population." Told that Pastor Karpenko and the two priests are civilians, he refused to transfer the call and put the phone down.

Earlier in the war, Karpenko had taken his wife and their four children to Ukrainian government-held territory, but had returned to Berdiansk to continue to lead his community and support local people in need.

Vefil Church was established in 2000 and gained registration in February 2001. Its home is at Vefil Christian Centre, a former ruined kindergarten which was restored to become the home of six Protestant congregations. Vefil Christian Centre took down its website immediately after Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

On 24 November, less than three weeks before Russian soldiers seized Pastor Karpenko, the Russian-installed Executive Committee of Berdiansk City Council registered Vefil Church as a Russian legal entity with Karpenko as leader. It was then included in the Russian list of legal entities, according to Russian federal tax records. The registration record lists the juridical address not as the Vefil Christian Centre address but a flat in Berdiansk.

The woman who answered the phone of the Russian tax inspection in Berdiansk – who did not give her name – told Forum 18 on 21 December that religious organisations need to be approved by the Russian Justice Ministry before being registered. She declined to discuss the registration of Vefil Church, citing confidentiality.

Vefil Church is so far the only religious community in Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Region to have been registered under Russian law (see below).

Berdiansk: One month with no news of seized priests

The Donetsk Exarchate of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church says that it has had no news of two of its priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, arrested more than a month ago in Berdiansk. "Keep demanding the urgent release of our priests because of the threat to their life and health," it told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia on 21 December.

On 16 November, Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) arrested the two parish priests, Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793). Russia's National Guard reports directly to the Russian President.

The following day, Russian forces searched Berdiansk's Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin - where Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan serve - and claim to have found explosives and "extremist" literature. It appears that the Russian occupation forces are considering bringing the two priests to trial on terrorism charges.

After calls went unanswered, Forum 18 sent written questions to the Russian-installed police in Berdiansk, asking what the police are doing (if anything) to locate Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan and to find those who seized them. "We only give answers in response to an official request," Berdiansk police told Forum 18 on 21 December. Forum 18 repeated its questions, but received no response by the end of the working day in Berdiansk of 21 December.

The duty officer at the Russian Military Command in Melitopol refused to discuss the cases of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan (or of Pastor Karpenko). "We can't say anything about these cases," the duty officer, who did not give his name, told Forum 18 on 21 December. "We deal only with the civilian population." Told that the two priests are civilians, he refused to transfer the call and put the phone down.

The Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 that with no priest left in Berdiansk, services in the parishes have stopped.

The Russian occupation authorities appear to have made no public statement about the arrests of Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan, nor about the accusations against them, nor which agency is carrying out the investigation.

On 24 November, the Russian media broadcast reports about the arrest of the priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793), including on Zvezda TV (a channel linked to the Russian military) and on the Izvestiya website. Both claimed that investigators had found explosives, detonators and pistols. Zvezda TV showed Fr Ivan talking, where he points out that he had not been present during the search of the church premises.

The TV station also claimed that the church library contained many books "banned in Russia". Zvezda TV and Izvestiya's video reports showed a masked man in uniform holding up books to the camera, including a collection of sermons by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, who headed the Church until his death in 1944.

A Moscow court ruled in March 2013 that a small book with a sermon by Metropolitan Sheptytsky – republished in Ukrainian in Poland in 1990 – was "extremist". Russia's Justice Ministry then added the book to its Federal List of Extremist Materials (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1899). This banned the book from being distributed in Russia and meant that anyone possessing it could face administrative charges. No other book by or about Metropolitan Sheptytsky appears to be on the Russian Federal List.

Zvezda TV also claimed that Fr Ivan had called on people "to sabotage the activities of the administration and to resist the Russian military. He also held prayers in support of the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian regime." It said that a court would determine Fr Ivan's fate, but without giving details of who might be investigating him, on what charges and which court might eventually hear any case.

On 25 November, the Donetsk Exarchate posted a statement on its website (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) refuting the accusations against Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan and calling for their release. On 30 November, the Exarchate renewed its call for its two priests to be freed and stressed that Fr Bohdan needs regular medication for a health condition. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life."

Officers of Rosgvardiya's Southern Region in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don on 30 November refused to give Forum 18 contacts for Rosgvardiya in Berdyansk or Zaporizhzhia Region of Ukraine.

Melitopol: Second Greek Catholic priest expelled

On 25 November, Russian forces detained Fr Peter Krenický, the parish priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Assumption of Saint Anna Church in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region. They released him the same day, but forced him to leave for Ukrainian government-held territory.

"Fortunately, Fr Peter is now safe - he was 'deported' to Zaporizhzhia," the Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 from Zaporizhzhia on 29 November.

Fr Peter's colleague, Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz, priest of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church in Melitopol, was left to hold services in the eight parishes in Melitopol and in neighbouring villages. On Sunday 27 November, he held services in as many of these churches as he could.

Masked soldiers with automatic weapons seized Fr Oleksandr on the morning of 2 December. "The interrogation went on for an hour," he said in an 8 December interview for the Greek Catholic television channel Zhyve. "They loaded me into a car, took me to Vasylivka, and then I walked to our territory."

The Donetsk Exarchate told Forum 18 that with no priest left in Melitopol, services in the parishes have stopped.

Fr Oleksandr says he wanted to remain to serve his flock in and around Melitopol. "Had I not been forcibly removed, I would have stayed there - that was my decision."

Fr Oleksandr also expressed concern for the seized priests in Berdyansk, Fr Ivan and Fr Bohdan. "I am asking you to pray for the priests from Berdyansk who are currently suffering in those torture chambers. We do not fully know what is happening to them."

Melitopol: Church life under occupation

Russian forces captured Melitopol on 1 March. Fr Oleksandr said he and his fellow Greek Catholic priests chose to remain to serve their congregations. His Church was involved in supporting the local population, including by feeding people.

Fr Oleksandr recalled in his 8 December interview that after the Russian seizure of Melitopol, the inter-faith council met every day at 11 o'clock in the city square and prayed for Ukraine. "At the same time, pro-Ukrainian rallies were held, and we prayed. These prayers lasted until the middle of August, until we were dispersed. I was not there during the crackdown, but there was a Protestant pastor who was imprisoned for five days for organising this prayer."

Fr Oleksandr said at one point he thought he was going to be shot at a checkpoint. "The special services came to me seven times: they talked to me as if I were the least important thing at all, and they were the bosses, in my house, in the church, and in the parish. Well, it's unpleasant, but I don't hold a grudge against them." He said he understood from comments during interrogation that someone was informing on him. They also pressured him to take a Russian passport, but he refused.

Fr Oleksandr recounted how children in the parish saw many times how the Russian special services came and interrogated him. "The children happened to be with us at that time, and they saw the mood I was in after the interrogations. They prayed a lot for me. And they asked: 'Father, are you leaving too?' I replied: 'No, I'm staying.'"

Fr Oleksandr also said they took the Church's van.

"Pro-Western religious sects and organisations"

The head of the Religious Organisations Department of the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Administration, Artyom Shablai, has given a series of interviews to the Russian media attacking religious "sects".

He claimed in an interview with Tass on 18 November that there is proof that many are involved in "extremist activity" and have connections with foreign intelligence services. He added that leaders of some unnamed religious communities had forced their members to give information so that Ukrainian forces could more accurately target locations in Russian-held territory.

Shablai said Jehovah's Witnesses had been very active in Zaporizhzhia Region, but had withdrawn their elders once the war started "because they might have given information that didn't suit the USA or the Kyiv regime".

Shablai similarly accused unnamed "neo-charismatic" churches of following the policies of foreign intelligence services and governments. He said their activity had now stopped in the Region.

On 14 December, Shablai accused local leaders and members of "pro-Western religious sects and organisations" of storing home-made explosive devices and grenades. He claimed that one unnamed pastor had "specialised technical training and three American passports".

Forum 18 was unable to reach Shablai at the Russian-installed Zaporizhzhia Administration in Melitopol on 21 December.

Seizing places of worship

In his 18 November Tass interview, religious affairs official Shablai spoke about the now closed places of worship in Russian-controlled parts of Zaporizhzhia Region. "At present their premises have not been given to other religious organisations," he said. "One of them is used by the Zaporizhzhia Region Youth Policy Ministry."

Among several local seizures of places of worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), at the beginning of August, the Russian military seized the building of Melitopol Christian Church, banning all further worship services. The building was taken over by the Youth and Sports Ministry. The Russian military seized Word of Life Pentecostal Church in the centre of Melitopol and began using it as a military base. Soldiers hung a camouflage net on the fence around the building.

"Russian military and police collaborators recently searched the building of Jehovah's Witnesses" in central Berdyansk, Berdyansk News Online noted. On 14 December, "local propagandists" then announced the "nationalisation" of the Kingdom Hall, it added. Other news sources said the Russian authorities had seized lists of local Jehovah's Witnesses and expressed fears that they might then harass those on the list.

Russia banned Jehovah's Witness as "extremist" in 2017 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) and courts have since jailed many for often long prison terms (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2775). Russia has also imposed such jailings in occupied Crimea (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2790).

Russian re-registration

Russia annexed Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions, as well as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), on 5 October. After that, occupation officials insisted that organisations that had registration in Ukraine – including religious organisations – had to be registered under Russian law to continue any legal existence.

On 24 November, the Russian tax authorities included in its list of registered legal entities one religious organisation in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region, Vefil Church in Berdyansk, that had previously been registered by the Ukrainian authorities. Russian soldiers seized its pastor, Serhiy Karpenko, less than three weeks later (see above).

On 29 November, the Russian tax authorities included in its list of registered legal entities 203 religious organisations in occupied Luhansk Region that had previously been registered by the Russian-backed LPR. Almost all of these - 191 - are Russian Orthodox communities under the Moscow Patriarchate. Only 12 are from other communities: 8 Muslim; 1 Jewish; 1 Hare Krishna; 1 Old Believer; and 1 Roman Catholic. (The LPR refused to register a whole range of religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721), including Orthodox not of the Moscow Patriarchate, Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses.)

Similarly, on 29 and 30 November, the Russian tax authorities included in its list of registered legal entities 191 religious organisations in occupied Donetsk Region that had previously been registered by the Russian-backed DPR. Most of these - 141 - are Russian Orthodox communities under the Moscow Patriarchate. A total of 50 are from other communities: 39 Protestant; 7 Muslim; 1 Jewish; 1 Hare Krishna; 1 independent Orthodox; and 1 Greek Catholic.

The Russian tax authorities have so far included in its list of registered legal entities no religious communities in occupied Kherson Region. (END)

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