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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Russian FSB raids, court cases, fines, deportation threats

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

On 2 March, officers of the Russian FSB security service and Luhansk Regional Police's Anti-Extremism Centre raided the Sunday worship meeting of a Baptist congregation in Stakhanov in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. On 10 April, a court acquitted the church's pastor. This was the latest raid on religious communities in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. Officers particularly target religious communities that do not have registration under Russian law. They seize religious literature, photograph those present and hand material to Prosecutor's Offices for religious leaders to be prosecuted.

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Police Anti-Extremism Centre continue to raid religious communities as they meet for worship in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine. Officers particularly target religious communities that do not have registration under Russian law. They seize religious literature and photograph those present. They then hand material to Prosecutor's Offices for religious leaders to be prosecuted.

On 2 March, officers of the Russian FSB security service and Luhansk Regional Police's Anti-Extremism Centre raided the Sunday meeting for worship of a Baptist congregation in Stakhanov in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. After the service, Anti-Extremism Centre officer Captain Gennady Turko ordered three church members – including the pastor Andrey Khmelevsky – to go with him to "give explanations". However, on 10 April, the judge at the Russian-controlled Stakhanov Town Court closed the case against the pastor because of "the absence of an offence". Stakhanov Police refused to discuss the raid with Forum 18 (see below).

On 20 February, the Russian-controlled Ilichev District Court in Mariupol fined Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov several days' average local wages for leading his unregistered Council of Churches Baptist congregation. Prosecutors accused him of violating Russian restrictions on "missionary activity". The duty officer at the Russian-controlled Ilichev District Police told Forum 18 that he knew nothing about any Pastor Ponomaryov and put the phone down (see below).

In late 2022, invading Russian forces had detained Pastor Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana for a month. Tatyana Ponomaryova is currently suffering from cancer (see below).

A City Prosecutor's Office and Police Anti-Extremism Centre inspection in December 2024 revealed that neither Donetsk Jewish Religious Community's place of worship nor religious materials available there had the full legal name and religious designation of the organisation as Russian law requires. The First Deputy Prosecutor launched a case against the community. A Donetsk court rejected Prosecutors' first attempt to have the community fined, but on the second attempt the court handed down a fine. The Justice Department in Donetsk refused to say who has now ordered the liquidation of the community (see below).

On 13 January, the same Donetsk court fined Arkady Shvarts for conducting "illegal missionary activity" (see below).

In March 2024, the Russian FSB security service raided a home in Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region where 34 members of an unregistered group of Muslims – identified as Al-Furqan Mosque – had gathered for Friday prayers. Officers seized Islamic literature and photographed the premises and those present (see below).

In April 2024, a Russian-controlled Court in Mariupol found the Imam's assistant Vladimir Belov guilty of "illegal missionary activity" and fined him about two weeks' average local wages. As Belov is a Ukrainian citizen, the Judge also ordered him deported "beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation" (see below).

Belov appealed against the fine and deportation order. On 18 April 2024, the Russian-controlled Donetsk Supreme Court left the fine on Belov unchanged, but removed the punishment of deportation. During the hearing, Yelena Pavlyukova of the Prosecutor's Office opposed any change to the deportation order. Prosecutor Pavlyukova absolutely refused to discuss her role in the case with Forum 18 (see below).

In the latest example of the seizure of property owned by religious communities, a new cinema – to be named Komsomolets – is nearing completion in the seized Church of Good Changes, a Protestant church in Mariupol. Mariupol city administration seized the church building in 2024 without compensation (see below).

An official of the Mariupol branch of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office refused to answer any questions about violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of city residents (see below).

Bans on religious communities, fines for meeting for worship

Russian occupation forces have repeatedly forcibly closed religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902) in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

Russian-imposed Governor Yevgeny Balitsky banned four religious communities (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2882) in Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia Region in December 2022: the Greek Catholic Church, Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Protestant Church. (The buildings of Grace, Melitopol Christian, and Word of Life churches had been seized in September 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).) Occupation Governor Balitsky accused these Churches of links with foreign "special services" and ordered all their property seized.

A February 2024 meeting of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, chaired by Russian-imposed Governor Balitsky, praised the "halting of the work of religious sects which had taken part in organising mass disorder and anti-Russian activity", the governor's website noted on 26 February 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2902).

Russian occupation officials treat all Ukrainian religious communities which have not received Russian state registration as illegal (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2890).

Armed, masked men broke up worship meetings of a Council of Churches Baptist church in Russian-occupied Melitopol three times between October 2023 and November 2024. They checked members' passports and church literature. Police questioned the church's Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, insisting he led a religious service without informing the authorities and conducted illegal missionary activity. Three administrative cases were brought to court against the pastor (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2949).

The Russian-occupied or partially-occupied regions of Ukraine which Russia illegally claimed to have annexed in 2022 (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492>) – began imposing punishments under Russia's Criminal and Administrative Codes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808) in late 2022 in courts which Russia controls.

Russian-controlled courts in occupied Ukraine have heard many cases to punish "illegal missionary activity" (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4). This carries a fine for individuals of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles.

In addition to the fine on the Muslim in Mariupol in 2024 (and the overturned deportation), at least five other cases of "illegal missionary activity" were heard in Russian-controlled courts in occupied Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2949) in 2024. Court cases often followed raids on religious communities by officers of the Russian FSB security service and Police Anti-Extremism Centres.

The Russian occupation authorities also use Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26 to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in Crimea, which Russia illegally occupied in 2014. Many of those targeted are Muslims who lead prayers in mosques (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2878).

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>).

Stakhanov: Russian FSB raid on Baptist worship meeting, court case

On 2 March, Russian FSB security service officers raided the Sunday meeting for worship of a Baptist congregation in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. The congregation – which like all Council of Churches Baptist congregations – chooses not to seek official registration. The congregation has been meeting in the same house for many years.

The FSB officers were accompanied by officers of Luhansk Regional Police's Anti-Extremism Centre.

"They did not interrupt the service, but took photos," local Baptists noted on 11 April. After the service, Anti-Extremism Centre officer Captain Gennady Turko ordered the congregation's leader, Andrey Khmelevsky, and two witnesses to go with him to "give explanations".

Police then prepared an administrative case against the congregation's leader, Pastor Khmelevsky, and handed it to the Russian-controlled Stakhanov Town Court. On 10 April, the judge at the court closed the case because of "the absence of an offence", Baptists noted. About 20 church members came to the court to support their pastor, greeting him with flowers.

The woman who answered the phone at Stakhanov Police on 15 April listened to Forum 18's question about the raid and then put the phone down. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

Telephones at Luhansk Regional FSB and Regional Police – including at its Press Service – went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 15 April.

Mariupol: Fined for leading unregistered community

Prosecutors handed a case to court on 7 February against Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov, who leads a Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. Prosecutors accused him under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") for leading his unregistered congregation.

On 20 February, Judge Yuliya Golovchenko of the Russian-controlled Ilichev District Court in Mariupol found Pastor Ponomaryov guilty, according to court records. "The hearing lasted three hours and ruled to fine Leonid Ponomaryov 5,000 Russian Roubles," local Baptists noted the same day. The fine represents several days' average local wages.

Pastor Ponomaryov did not appeal against the court decision and it entered into force on 3 March.

Russian forces seized Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) soon after they occupied Mariupol, holding them from 21 September to 21 October 2022. Tatyana Ponomaryova is currently suffering from cancer.

The duty officer at the Russian-controlled Ilichev District Police told Forum 18 on 15 April that he knew nothing about any Pastor Ponomaryov and put the phone down.

An official of the Mariupol branch of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office – who did not give his name - refused to answer any questions by phone on 15 April about violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of city residents.

Donetsk: Judge fines Jewish community

On 13 March, Judge Vadim Tkachenko of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Voroshilov Inter-District Court found the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community guilty of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 3 ("Implementation of activities by a religious organisation without indicating its official full name, including the issuing or distribution, within the framework of missionary activity, of literature and printed, audio, and video material without a label bearing this name, or with an incomplete or deliberately false label"). The Judge handed down a fine, according to court records.

Donetsk Jewish Religious Community gained registration under Russian law in April 2019, according to Russian tax records. The process of liquidating the community as a legal entity began on 10 April 2025.

A City Prosecutor's Office and Police Anti-Extremism Centre inspection of 7 December 2024 revealed that neither Donetsk Jewish Religious Community's place of worship nor religious materials available there had the full legal name and religious designation of the organisation as Russian law requires. The First Deputy Prosecutor launched the case against the community on 16 December 2024, presenting photographic evidence to the court.

However, at the court on 24 December 2024, Judge Artyom Sytenko ruled to return the case to prosecutors. Donetsk's First Deputy Prosecutor appealed against this decision. On 20 February 2025 – in a decision seen by Forum 18 – Judge Anatoly Skripnik of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Supreme Court returned the case for a new hearing at Voroshilov Inter-District Court.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Police Anti-Extremism Centre. Telephones at Donetsk Regional Police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 15 April.

The Non-Commercial Organisations Department of the Russian-controlled Justice Department in Donetsk refused to tell Forum 18 on 15 April whether Donetsk Jewish Religious Community is being forced to liquidate, or if this was the choice of the community.

Donetsk: Another "missionary activity" fine

On 13 January, Judge Sergei Krylovsky of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Voroshilov Inter-District Court fined Arkady Shvarts under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"), according to court records.

Shvarts did not appeal and the decision went into force on 10 February.

Mariupol: Raid, literature seizures, Imam's assistant nearly deported

The Russian FSB security service raided a home in Mariupol in the south of Russian-occupied Donetsk Region on 29 March 2024. It found that 34 members of an unregistered group of Muslims – identified as Al-Furqan Mosque – had gathered there for Friday prayers and to study their faith. Officers seized documents and religious literature. Officers photographed the literature, the premises and those present. Officers found no record that the community was registered or that it had notified the Russian authorities of its existence.

The same day, the FSB informed Donetsk Regional Prosecutor's Office, which in turn informed its office in Mariupol.

The city Prosecutor's Office then summoned Vladimir Belov, an aide to the imam, on 8 April 2024 to give testimony. He admitted that the community functioned without Russian registration. It also summoned and questioned the Imam on 29 March 2024 and twice afterwards.

On 1 April 2024 – the Monday after the FSB raid - Belov visited the Non-Commercial Organisations Department of the Russian-controlled Justice Department in Donetsk to enquire about registering the community under Russian law.

As Belov is a Ukrainian citizen (he had been born locally), the Prosecutor's Office brought a case against him under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity").

On 10 April 2024, Judge Dmitry Romanov of Mariupol's Russian-controlled Zhovtnev District Court found Belov guilty and fined him 30,000 Russian Roubles (about two weeks' average local wages). The Judge also ordered him deported "beyond the bounds of the Russian Federation", with detention until then in the Deportation Centre in the village of Sinyavskoe in Neklinovsky District of Russia's Rostov Region.

(Russia held two Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priests from occupied Donetsk Region - Fr Khristofor Khrimli and Fr Andri Chui – in the Sinyavskoe Deportation Centre from October 2023 until early 2024 before sending both to Georgia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2903). They were deported as part of their punishment under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5.)

Belov appealed against the fine and deportation order. On 18 April 2024, Judge Oleg Krivenkov of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Supreme Court removed the punishment of deportation. However, he left the fine on Belov unchanged, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. During the hearing, Yelena Pavlyukova of the Prosecutor's Office opposed any change to the deportation order.

Prosecutor Pavlyukova absolutely refused to discuss her role in the case with Forum 18 on 15 April 2025 and put the phone down.

Telephones at Donetsk Regional FSB and Regional Police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 15 April.

An official of the Mariupol branch of the Russian-controlled Donetsk Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office – who did not give his name - refused to answer any questions by phone on 15 April about violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief of city residents.

Mariupol: Seized church being turned into cinema

In the latest example of the seizure of property owned by religious communities, a new cinema – to be named Komsomolets – is nearing completion in the seized Church of Good Changes, a Protestant church in Mariupol. Mariupol 24 local television on 1 April showed builders from the Russian city of St Petersburg working on the building. The nearly five-minute report did not mention that the building had been confiscated from the Church after the Russian occupation.

The Komsomolets cinema was built in 1970. The Church of Good Changes bought the building from a private owner in 2016 and Church members converted it into its place of worship. "We blessed the building and were so joyful," the pastor, Gennady Mokhnenko, told Forum 18 from Ukrainian government-held territory on 15 April 2025. "We had collected money to buy it over many years."

The last meeting for worship was held in the building on Sunday 20 February 2022, four days before the full-scale Russian invasion. "I preached for one minute only from the Parable of the Good Samaritan about the first need – to stop the bleeding," Pastor Mokhnenko recalled. "Then for one hour a doctor taught us all how to stop bleeding. The service was prophetic."

The building – which housed a shelter in its basement - was damaged in April 2022 during the Russian invasion. In June 2022, the Prosecutor's Office launched a criminal case against Pastor Mokhnenko. "They didn't tell me what the charges are," he told Forum 18.

Pastor Mokhnenko supported the Ukrainian side in the war and took part in prayer meetings in Mariupol at the time of the invasion. He now works from Ukrainian government-held territory as a military chaplain.

Mariupol city administration seized the church building in 2024 without compensation and began work turning it into a cinema. Telephones at the city administration went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 15 April 2025.

Following the establishment of the Russian-backed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014, the rebel authorities seized numerous places of worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2689) of a variety of religious communities, including those belonging to Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, Muslims, as well as Donetsk Christian University. Rebel officials claim many were abandoned, but communities deny this. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Occupied Ukraine (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=17>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Occupied Ukraine religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963)

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