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OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Raids, registration pressure, places of worship deemed "ownerless"

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

A prosecutor and police in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region raided Krasnodon's Council of Churches Baptist congregation's Pentecost worship meeting on 8 June. "The main issue is the registration of the church!" Pastor Vladimir Rytikov noted. Asked if she could explain why Krasnodon Police raided the Church, the duty officer said only: "We can't." Occupation authorities threaten other Baptist congregations that meet without seeking permission. The Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Region administration lists a Greek Catholic Church – whose priest was expelled in 2022 – and a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall as "ownerless".

On 8 June, as the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Krasnodon in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region was celebrating Pentecost, the deputy prosecutor and police raided its Sunday morning worship meeting. "The main issue is the registration of the church!" Pastor Vladimir Rytikov noted. "I explained that for a number of reasons, we do not register. One of the reasons is the duty of the pastor to report to the authorities about the life of church members and about the service in the church, and this is betrayal."

The congregation – like all Council of Churches Baptist congregations – chooses not to seek official registration. The raid is part of increasing pressure by Russian occupation authorities on their congregations' exercise of freedom of religion or belief without officials' permission (see below).

Asked if she could explain why Krasnodon District Police took part in a raid on the Baptist Church, the duty officer said only: "We can't." She then put the phone down (see below).

Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, who leads the Council of Churches Baptist church in Melitopol, rejects a court order that he should notify the Russian authorities of his congregation's existence. The duty official at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 that he was not able to discuss anything (see below).

On 30 May, Russian-controlled police raided the Council of Churches Baptist church in Luhansk's Artyomovsky District. "The local police officer, acting on the FSB's instructions and threatening to seal the church, demanded to be told who is in charge and when church members gather," local Baptists noted. Telephones went unanswered at the Russian-controlled Artyomovsky District Police (see below).

The Russian occupation authorities have been seizing property owned by Ukrainian individuals or organisations that they deem "ownerless". Among them have been places of worship already seized from religious communities, especially those the Russian regime does not like (see below).

In October 2024, the Russian occupation administration of Zaporizhzhia Region included in a list of such property the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Melitopol and the neighbouring parish house. It described them as a "single-storey and two-storey building, surrounding land (used for conducting religious rituals)" (see below).

Masked Russian soldiers with automatic weapons seized the parish priest Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz in December 2022 and expelled him from Russian-occupied territory. Taking part in the raid was Artyom Sharlay (see below).

Sharlay, now the head of the Russian occupiers' Department for Work with Ethnic, Religious and Cossack Organisations of the Social and Political Communications Department of the Internal Policy Department of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Also listed as "ownerless" in occupied Zaporizhzhia Region in November 2024 was a building "formerly used by representatives of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation" and a "building of religious designation" in the village of Derevetskoye (see below).

"Experts" appointed by Russia's Justice Ministry insist that an Orthodox Brotherhood in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region provided "deliberately false information that it operates as part of the Luhansk diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, that is, a structure

that does not in reality exist". The "expert conclusion" concludes that because the Brotherhood's documents were not reliable, "registration of the Brotherhood does not seem expedient". The Brotherhood still has Russian registration (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2982), despite the Expert Council's recommendation.

In late April, Russian security officials reportedly visited at least one church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2982) in the Russian-occupied part of Kherson Region. "The goal: to check how exactly priests conduct the service and 'hold conversations'," the Yellow Ribbon civil resistance movement noted. "The reason is that one of the local priests refused to mention the Russian military in a positive context and did not justify the war against Ukraine during the Easter service".

Russian-controlled courts are increasingly punishing individuals and religious communities in occupied parts of Ukraine under Russia's "anti-missionary" laws (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2980). On 23 May, the Russian-controlled Budennovsk Inter-District Court in the occupied Ukrainian city of Donetsk fined Council of Churches Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rudomyotkin several days' average local wage for allegedly conducting missionary activity. The fine came two days after the same court punished the city's Roman Catholic parish.

Krasnodon: Prosecutor's Office, Police pressure Baptists to register

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region has met in the same location since 1961. The Church has been led for some years by Pastor Vladimir Rytikov. The congregation – like all Council of Churches Baptist congregations – chooses not to seek official registration.

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.

The now 65-year-old Pastor Rytikov and the Krasnodon Baptist congregation have faced repeated pressure from Russian occupation forces in recent years, including armed raids on their meetings for worship. The local court has repeatedly fined Pastor Rytikov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2949) for leading his congregation.

On 8 June 2025, the deputy prosecutor of Krasnodon raided the congregation's Sunday morning meeting for worship. The official was accompanied by police officers and officials in plain clothes who arrived in at least two vehicles. The Church was that day celebrating the festival of Pentecost and the Trinity.

After the service was over, the officials questioned Pastor Rytikov, as well as the owner of the building where the Church meets and other church members. Officials demanded that the Pastor notify Russian officials of the "start of activity of a religious group". They also warned that he would be summoned to the Prosecutor's Office.

"The main issue is the registration of the church!" Pastor Rytikov noted the same day. "I explained that for a number of reasons, we do not register. One of the reasons is the duty of the pastor to report to the authorities about the life of church members and about the service in the church, and this is betrayal."

Pastor Rytikov noted that he refused to sign the record of the interrogation "because I have a principled attitude to this". He added that "many times in my life, they deceived, wrote one thing, and then distorted it".

Pastor Rytikov also noted that church members were collecting signatures on petitions to the Russian authorities about the enforced closure of the church building in Kurganinsk in Krasnodar Region of southern Russia on 16 May and violations of church members' rights elsewhere. "They photographed them."

Officials also took one copy of each religious publication they could find, photographed all the rooms and wrote descriptions of what they could see. They then left.

Asked on 9 June if she could explain why Krasnodon District Police took part in a raid on the Baptist Church the day before, the duty officer said only: "We can't." She then put the phone down.

Oksana Shchebunayeva, listed as Krasnodon's acting prosecutor, told Forum 18 on 9 June that she had retired on 30 April and therefore would not have been involved in the Baptist case.

Melitopol: Baptist congregation rejects court's notification demand

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the Russian-occupied city of Melitopol has faced further pressure. In October 2023, armed and masked men in military uniform raided the Church's Sunday meeting for worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869). In September 2024, nearly a year after the previous raid, men in masks

"unexpectedly" arrived again at the Council of Churches Baptist congregation In Melitopol and broke up its meeting for worship. Armed, masked men in camouflage uniform again invaded the church's Sunday meeting for worship in November 2024.

Its pastor, Dmitry Malakhov, who was interrogated twice in 2024, then faced three administrative cases (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2949). On 18 December 2024, the Judge at the Russian-controlled Melitopol Inter-District Court closed the "illegal missionary activity" administrative case because of the statute of limitations and issued a warning in the case of Pastor Malakhov failing to notify the Russian authorities of the community's existence. The Judge postponed the hearing on the third case - of failing to give the organisation's full legal name.

The Deputy Prosecutor was dissatisfied with the warning to Pastor Malakhov for failing to notify the Russian authorities of the community's existence. He lodged a civil suit to court that "this violation creates the conditions creates conditions for the emergence of an unfavourable crime situation in the territory of the Zaporizhzhia region, which, in turn, may lead to the violation of the rights and freedoms of an indefinite number of persons".

On 27 March, Judge Olga Chuveleva of the Russian-controlled Melitopol Inter-District Court, supported the Deputy Prosecutor's civil suit. She ordered the Church "in the person of Dmitry Gennadyevich Malakhov to inform in writing about the start of activity by the body empowered to take a decision on the registration of religious organisations" within one month of the court decision entering legal force.

Pastor Malakhov disagreed with the court decision and lodged an appeal. "My fellow-believers have never taken a decision, whether verbally or in writing, to create a religious group and give it some kind of name," he wrote. "All the more because in the notification of the start of a religious group's activity, it is necessary to give information on the bases of the religious belief, on places where services and other religious rites and ceremonies are held, on the leader (representative) and on individuals joining the religious group with their surnames, first names, patronymics and residential addresses."

Pastor Malakhov said collecting and providing this personal information was not in accordance with laws on the protection of personal data and the guarantees of the right to freedom of conscience in Russia's Constitution, which defend the right of individuals not to be forced to reveal any religious beliefs.

"Thus, the court decision obliging Dmitry Malakhov to collect, process and hand over personal data of his Christian friends contradicts the law on personal data," local Baptists noted on 24 April.

The telephone of the Russian-controlled Melitopol Inter-District Court went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 9 and 10 June.

The duty official at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Prosecutor's Office told Forum 18 on 9 June that he was not able to discuss anything.

Luhansk: Police officer threatens to seal Baptist church

On 30 May, Russian-controlled police raided the Council of Churches Baptist church in Luhansk's Artyomovsky District. "The local police officer, acting on the FSB's instructions and threatening to seal the church, demanded to be told who is in charge and when church members gather," local Baptists noted the same day.

Telephones went unanswered at the Russian-controlled Artyomovsky District Police each time Forum 18 called between 3 and 10 June.

The church went ahead with Sunday worship in 1 June, local Baptists told Forum 18.

Closing, seizing places of worship

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.

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the occupation authorities seized many places of worship from communities they did not like. These included Protestant churches forcibly closed and seized (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963) in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region, including Grace Protestant Church, Melitopol Christian Church, and Word of Life Church. The occupation authorities have used these buildings for other purposes.

A new cinema – to be named Komsomolets – is nearing completion in the seized Church of Good Changes, a Protestant church in

Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. Mariupol city administration seized the church building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2970) in 2024 without compensation and began work turning it into a cinema.

Melitopol: Seized Greek Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall "ownerless"?

The Russian occupation authorities have been seizing property owned by Ukrainian individuals or organisations that they deem "ownerless". Among them have been places of worship already seized from religious communities, especially those the Russian regime does not like.

Such "ownerless" property is often listed on occupation administrations' websites, including in the Russian-occupied part of Zaporizhzhia Region. To regain such property, an owner must present a current Russian passport, documents authorising the individual to act in relation to the property, and unspecified legal documents confirming ownership.

Artyom Sharlay, the head of the Russian occupiers' Department for Work with Ethnic, Religious and Cossack Organisations of the Social and Political Communications Department of the Internal Policy Department of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Regional Administration, did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called between 3 and 9 June.

On 28 October 2024, the Russian occupation administration of Zaporizhzhia Region included in a list of such property the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in Melitopol and the neighbouring parish house. It gave the address – 83 Osipenko Street – and added "single-storey and two-storey building, surrounding land (used for conducting religious rituals)". Work on building the church began in 2010 and was completed in 2011.

Russian occupation forces have expelled the parish's priests from territory they control and the Russian-controlled administration does not recognise the parish's legal status granted by the Ukrainian authorities in 2010.

Masked Russian soldiers with automatic weapons seized parish priest Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799) on 2 December 2022. "The interrogation went on for an hour," he told the Greek Catholic television channel Zhyve days after his release. "They loaded me into a car, took me to Vasylivka, and then I walked to our territory."

On 25 November 2022, Russian forces had detained another Greek Catholic priest in Melitopol, Fr Peter Krenický, the parish priest of the Greek Catholic Assumption of Saint Anna Church. They released him the same day, but forced him to leave for Ukrainian government-held territory (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799).

Among those present in December 2022 when Russian officials searched the church and Fr Oleksandr's home was Artyom Sharlay, the priest told the Kyiv Independent for the documentary film "No God But Theirs" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb7Tc58zLjU>), posted on YouTube on 29 May 2025.

Sharlay was the only one of the raiders not wearing a mask. "He looked through the literature we had there," Fr Oleksandr recalled.

On 21 November 2024, the Russian occupation administration of Zaporizhzhia Region listed as "ownerless" a "non-residential building" in the settlement of Kuibyshevo, adding "formerly used by representatives of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation". A "building of religious designation" in the village of Derevetskoye was also included in the list.

Russia's Supreme Court declared all Jehovah's Witness organisations "extremist" and banned them (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2297) in 2017. The Russian occupation authorities are also imposing this ban (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963) in parts of Ukraine they occupy. (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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