

11 June 2025

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Bishop says no" on Ukrainian Orthodox entities

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

The Russian-controlled Justice Department requested an "expert conclusion" on a Brotherhood of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Russian-occupied Luhansk from Russia's Justice Ministry. Its Expert Council said the Brotherhood 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". It cited Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Pantaleimon that "Luhansk Diocese does not support the creation on its canonical territory of Orthodox parishes, brotherhoods and other religious organisations" not part of the Russian Orthodox Church.

"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 Ministry's Expert Council cited the Moscow Patriarchate Bishop, Metropolitan Pantaleimon, that "Luhansk Diocese does not support the creation on its canonical territory of Orthodox parishes, brotherhoods and other religious organisations which are not part of" the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is historically and ecclesiastically affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, but in 1990 (and again in 2017) was declared "a self-governing church with wide autonomy". Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Moscow Patriarchate unilaterally subjugated in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine to the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate or created its own new dioceses. Those who resisted the enforced takeover faced pressure from Russian officials (see below).

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is separate from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch (see below).

The "expert conclusion" - completed by the Expert Council on 11 February – concludes that because the Brotherhood's documents were not reliable, "registration of the Brotherhood does not seem expedient". The Brotherhood still has Russian registration in occupied Luhansk, despite the Expert Council's recommendation (see below).

The official at the department that registers religious communities at the Russian-controlled Luhansk Justice Department – who did not give her name – said she was "of course" familiar with the "expert conclusion" on the Brotherhood. However, she refused to say if the view of Metropolitan Pantaleimon represents the view of the Russian state. She refused to say if communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are allowed to exist and gain Russian registration in Russian-controlled parts of Luhansk Region. "We don't give comments to journalists," she repeatedly told Forum 18 (see below).

Officials at the Justice Ministry in Moscow did not answer the phone. Viktoriya Burkovskaya, chair of the Ministry's Expert Council who signed the "expert conclusion", did not respond to questions (see below).

In late April, Russian security officials reportedly visited at least one church 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" (see below).

Fines, raids, pressure to register, declaring places of worship "ownerless"

Russian-controlled courts in occupied parts of Ukraine are increasingly punishing individuals and religious communities 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.

Russian occupation officials – including prosecutors and police – have raided places of worship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981). They especially target communities – including Council of Churches Baptists – which function without Russian registration. On 30 May, police raided the Council of Churches Baptist church in Luhansk's Artyomovsky District. On 8 June, as Krasnodon's Council of Churches Baptist congregation was celebrating Pentecost, the deputy prosecutor and police raided its Sunday morning worship meeting.

Pastor Dmitry Malakhov, who leads the Council of Churches Baptist church in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region, is challenging a court order (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981) that he must notify the Russian authorities of his congregation's existence.

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981), especially those the Russian regime does not like.

In late 2024, the Russian occupation administration of Zaporizhzhia Region included in a list of such property (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2981) 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)". It also listed a building "formerly used by representatives of the Jehovah's Witness religious organisation" and a "building of religious designation" in the village of Derevetskoye.

Moscow Patriarchate takes over Ukrainian Orthodox dioceses

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is historically and ecclesiastically affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, but in 1990 (and again in 2017) was declared "a self-governing church with wide autonomy". Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Moscow Patriarchate unilaterally subjugated dioceses in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine to the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate or created its own new dioceses.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is separate from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which was granted autocephaly (independence) by the Ecumenical Patriarch in 2019. The Russian occupation authorities have crushed all the parishes of the OCU (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963) in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

Priests of both the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) have been disappeared (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2963) after they reject pressure to join new dioceses the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church has unilaterally established on occupied Ukrainian territory.

Fr Kostiantyn Maksimov served a Ukrainian Orthodox parish in Tokmak in Russian-occupied Ukraine until his arrest and enforced disappearance in May 2023. He is serving a 14-year sentence in a strict regime labour camp (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2962) in Russia's Saratov Region on "espionage" charges.

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, claimed to Forum 18 in October 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2867) that Fr Kostiantyn had not wanted the Berdyansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to move to be an integral part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church took over the Diocese in May 2023.

Officials pressured another local Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest, Fr Vladimir Saviisky of St Nicholas Church in Primorsk, in 2023 to accept the transfer of the Berdyansk Diocese from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to the Russian Orthodox Church. He refused (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2869).

Ukrainian Orthodox Church, "a structure that does not in reality exist"

On 8 November 2024, the Russian-controlled Luhansk Region Justice Department requested an "expert conclusion" from the Justice Ministry in Moscow on the Brotherhood of Cyril and Methodius Equal to the Apostles of the Luhansk Diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Ministry passed the request to its Expert Council, together with copies of the Brotherhood's documents. The Ministry asked it to determine whether the organisation is religious and whether the information it supplied is accurate.

The Brotherhood was established by Ukrainian Orthodox priest Fr Georgy (Yury) Melish as part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Luhansk Diocese. The Ukrainian authorities registered the Brotherhood in November 2002.

Following the establishment of the Russian-backed Luhansk People's Republic in 2014, the Brotherhood gained registration with the LPR Justice Ministry in July 2018. Russian tax records show that the Brotherhood gained Russian registration on 29 November 2022, with Fr Georgy as its head. He also serves as priest in the village of Khryashchuvate in Russian-controlled Luhansk Region.

The "expert conclusion" on the Brotherhood was completed by the Expert Council on 11 February 2025 and signed by its chair, Viktoriya Burkovskaya. A Moscow lawyer and professor, she has headed the Expert Council since 2015.

The "expert conclusion" found that the Brotherhood is religious. However, in answer to the question as to whether the information the Brotherhood provided was reliable, it noted that "the Brotherhood is in spiritual and canonical communion with the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Luhansk Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church".

The "expert conclusion" then quotes a letter of 9 January 2025 from Metropolitan Pantaleimon (Povoroznyuk) to the head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Legal Department, Sister Kseniya Chernega, that "Luhansk Diocese does not support the creation on its canonical territory of Orthodox parishes, brotherhoods and other religious organisations which are not part of the structure of the ROC [Russian Orthodox Church]".

Although Metropolitan Pantaleimon was appointed by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and its Luhansk Diocese does not appear to have been formally transferred to the direct jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, the bishop appears to have accepted the direct subjugation to Moscow. The diocesan website states that it is the Luhansk Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The "expert conclusion" notes that the Brotherhood's statute – adopted on 17 September 2024 – gives "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 Council found "unconvincing" a 16 December 2024 clarification from the Brotherhood that this was a "technical error". It adds that "in September 2024, only the Luhansk Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church functioned, of which the Brotherhood was not part".

The "expert conclusion" – which is only a recommendation – concludes that because the Brotherhood's documents were not reliable, "registration of the Brotherhood does not seem expedient".

The Brotherhood's Russian registration remains valid as of 11 June. (24 organisations affiliated to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have Russian registration in occupied Luhansk Region, 10 in occupied Donetsk Region and 1 in the occupied Crimean city of Sevastopol. Other Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine have no UOC communities with Russian registration.)

The woman who answered the phone at the Brotherhood on 9 June declined to put Forum 18 through to Fr Georgy or answer Forum18's questions.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Expert Council chair Burkovskaya by phone on 9 June to find out:

- why she and her colleagues appeared to accept the view of the Russian Orthodox bishop in reaching their conclusions;
- why the affiliation of the Brotherhood makes any difference to whether or not it should be allowed to register;
- and whether she believes that Ukrainian Orthodox Church organisations should not be allowed to gain Russian registration.

Forum 18 sent the questions late on 9 June in writing. Forum 18 had received no response by the morning of the working day in Moscow of 11 June.

The official at the department that registers religious communities at the Russian-controlled Luhansk Justice Department – who did not give her name – said she was "of course" familiar with the February "expert conclusion" on the Brotherhood. However, she refused to say if the view of Metropolitan Pantaleimon cited in the analysis represents the view of the Russian state. She refused to say if communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are allowed to exist and gain Russian registration in Russian-controlled parts of Luhansk Region.

"We don't give comments to journalists," the official repeatedly told Forum 18 from Luhansk on 27 May. "It is not within our competence to explain the law." She then put the phone down.

Officials at the department that registers religious organisations at the Justice Ministry in Moscow did not answer their phones between 5 and 9 June.

Russian Justice Ministry's "expert conclusions"

The 18 February 2009 Russian Justice Ministry Order on State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis gives the Justice Ministry and its local Departments wide powers to commission such "expert conclusions".

"Expert conclusions" by Russia's Justice Ministry Expert Council following the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to some Crimean religious organisations having to make changes to get re-registration under Russian law

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2076). The Crimean Muftiate had to cut its ties to the Crimean Tatar Mejlis (a political organisation). The nine Catholic parishes had to formally cut ties with their Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol in southern Ukraine and are now in a Pastoral District of Crimea and Sevastopol. Yalta's Augsburg Lutheran congregation had to remove a reference to pilgrimages in its statute.

The 2025 "expert conclusion" on the Luhansk Brotherhood was one of six Russia's Justice Ministry has conducted of religious communities in Russian-occupied Ukraine since 2023. Of the other five communities, two were in Crimea, and three in Donetsk Region.

Four of the other "expert conclusions" found that the organisations were religious and that they had presented reliable information. Only in the case of the fifth, the conclusion on Donetsk Jewish Religious Community, did it find minor faults in its documents (such as giving the title of Russia's Religion Law slightly incorrectly).

A Donetsk court punished the Donetsk Jewish Religious Community in March for allegedly failing to give its official full name "within the framework of missionary activity". The organisation is now being liquidated (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2980).

Russians checking priests' sermons for loyalty?

In late April, Russian security officials reportedly visited at least one church 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 on 26 April. The group did not identify the church or its affiliation.

"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," Yellow Ribbon added. "This was complained about by one of the visitors from Russia, of whom there are already more than 15,000 people in the occupied Kherson Region." (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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f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY