

Table of Contents

- ***CRIMEA: Mosque closed as "There is no community there"?***
- ***Ukraine's MFA condemns OCU eviction from cathedral in Russia-occupied Crimea***
- ***CRIMEA: Third jailing as second Jehovah's Witness jailed***
- ***CRIMEA: JW Artem Gerasimov: six years in prison***
- ***CRIMEA: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Crimea under Russian rule (April)***
- ***CRIMEA: Prosecuting worship as "illegal missionary activity"***
- ***CRIMEA: A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six years in prison***
- ***CRIMEA: "Unjustifiable to jail someone for reading the Bible"***
- ***CRIMEA: Six months in Russian prison punishment cell***
- ***CRIMEA: 35 "anti-missionary" prosecutions in 2019***
- ***DONBAS: Donetsk: Raid, fine for unregistered worship meetings***
- ***DONBAS: Luhansk: No gas, electricity, water for unregistered communities***
- ***DONBAS: Luhansk: Soviet-era prisoner of conscience to be jailed again?***
- ***Four people hospitalized after anti-Semitic mob attack near Jewish holy site***

CRIMEA: Mosque closed as "There is no community there"?

Officials have closed the mosque in Zavetnoye in Sovetsky District of eastern Crimea, which was handed to the community in 2004. Police and plain clothes officers raided it in March. In April, a court fined Imam Dilyaver Khalilov for leading Friday prayers. Asked how the Muslim community should worship now the authorities are seizing their place of worship, Emil Velilyayev, deputy head of Sovetsky District, responded: "There is no community there."

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (18.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2QsOCNG> - Officials have already declared closed an independent mosque in the village of Zavetnoye in Sovetsky District of eastern Crimea, raided by police and plain clothes officers in March. They insist the mosque the community was given, has repaired and has been using since 2004 is not a mosque but a sports complex. In July, the mosque's Imam Dilyaver Khalilov failed to overturn a fine handed down in April for leading Friday prayers.

Asked by Forum 18 how the Muslim community in Zavetnoye should worship now that the authorities are seizing their place of worship, Emil Velilyayev, deputy head of Sovetsky District, responded: "There is no community there" (see below).

A second independent mosque community – which has worshipped in the 19th century Yukhary-Jami mosque in the southern Crimean town of Alushta since 1994 – faces the seizure of its place of worship. The community's last-ditch appeal against the seizure is now in the Russian Supreme Court (see below).

The mosque community is challenging a 2018 Crimean Council of Ministers decision which handed control of the Yukhary-Jami mosque to Crimea's State Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations and Deported Citizens. The community points to decisions in 1994 and 1996 which handed the mosque to the community (see below).

On 10 June, a Magistrate's Court in Alushta found the mosque's Imam, Yusuf Ashirov, guilty of conducting "illegal missionary activity" by leading prayers and preaching in Yukhary-Jami mosque. Alushta City Court rejected his appeal on 14 August (see below).

On 22 July, Crimea's Justice Ministry wrote to the Alushta Muslim community with an official warning about "extremism". It demanded that the community should remove its leader Ruslan Emirvaliyev from among the founders, pointing to an Alushta City Court fine on him for posting an image online that prosecutors considered "extremist". If the community fails to remove him, officials will regard it as "extremist" (see below).

Threats to places of worship continue against other religious communities as well. Courts in Crimea have ordered the expulsion of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral currently housed in a building in the centre of the Crimean capital Simferopol. Officials claim its small wooden chapel in the western Crimean city of Yevpatoriya was built illegally and has ordered the community to destroy it.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine appealed to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which has asked the Russian government to provide information by 24 August about the actions they intend to take (see forthcoming F18News article).

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally. Since the Russian occupation, raids and prosecutions of Muslims (most of whom are Crimean Tatars) and Jehovah's Witnesses have been frequent.

Zavetnoye: Mosque declared closed

Officials have declared closed an independent mosque in the village of Zavetnoye in Sovetsky District of eastern Crimea, known as Savurchi Mosque after the Crimean Tatar name of the village. Police and plain clothes officials raided the mosque after Friday prayers on 20 March. They insist the mosque the community repaired and has been using for 16 years is not a mosque but a sports complex.

"Officials closed the mosque immediately after the raid, telling the people that no one can go in there to pray," the lawyer Emil Kurbedinov told Forum 18 from the Crimean capital Simferopol on 3 August.

The mosque community first gained registration with the Ukrainian authorities in 2000. Zavetnoye Village Council handed over to the community a former sports building of about 130 square metres (1,400 sq. feet) as a mosque in 2004. The building is next to a sports field. The community repaired and rebuilt the run-down building with its own resources.

The building used as the mosque is one of several structures in the centre of the village collectively entered in the Russian cadastral register as a sports complex, on land designated as being "For the placement of objects of physical culture and sport".

Local officials defended the enforced closure, which was unrelated to measures to counter the coronavirus pandemic. "Worship there is banned," Olga Fisenko, head of Zavetnoye Village Council, told Forum 18 on 17 August. Asked why, she responded: "The building is not their property." Told that the community was given the building in 2004 and has been worshipping there over the 16 years since then, she added: "They're not registered."

Fisenko refused to answer any other questions and referred Forum 18 to Emil Velilyayev, deputy head of Sovetsky District, where the village of Zavetnoye is located.

Velilyayev insisted that the mosque building is a sports complex. Told by Forum 18 on 17 August that the Village Council allocated the building to the community in 2004 when it was half-ruined, and it was then restored and rebuilt by the community with its own resources, he responded: "It must be registered, and it is not. People must visit an officially-registered mosque."

Asked why the community cannot use the place of worship it has been using since 2004, Velilyayev responded: "They don't have documentation for the building, whether under Ukrainian or Russian law."

Asked how the Muslim community in Zavetnoye should worship now that the authorities are seizing their place of worship, Velilyayev responded: "There is no community there."

Zavetnoye: Imam fined for Friday prayers

Imam Dilyaver Khalilov has failed to overturn a fine handed down in April for leading Friday prayers in the Zavetnoye mosque, which the court found to be an illegal meeting. On 6 July, Judge Oksana Shidakova of Crimea's Supreme Court in Simferopol rejected his appeal, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Trouble for the Imam began on 20 March, when police and plain clothes officials arrived at the mosque just after Friday prayers. They prevented worshippers from leaving and questioned them.

Officers told mosque members they were conducting an investigation about alleged "missionary activity", reading out the relevant Article 24.2 of Russia's Religion Law. They pressured the Imam to write a statement and promised they would later be in contact with him. Only one of the police officers, Valentin Shostak, gave his name.

Forum 18 reached police officer Shostak on 7 April, but he put the phone down as soon as it asked him about the raid.

The Prosecutor of Sovetsky District, Dmitry Bailema, summoned mosque leader Khalilov for questioning on 1 April, according to the summons seen by Forum 18. The summons related to a prosecution under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") following an "inspection" on the mosque in the village of Zavetnoye.

Article 5.26, Part 4 punishes "Russians conducting missionary activity" and incurs a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 Roubles. For organisations (legal entities), the fine is 100,000 to 1 million Roubles. Average monthly wages in Crimea for those in formal work are about 30,000 Roubles.

The Russian occupying authorities in Crimea frequently use Article 5.26, Part 4 to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. At least 24 such prosecutions are known to have been launched in 2019, of which 17 ended with punishment.

However, the summons to Imam Khalilov was then cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak, the lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy told Forum 18 on 7 April.

Prosecutor Bailema's phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 April.

Sovetsky District Prosecutors summoned Imam Khalilov on 15 April, where they informed him he was facing charges under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4.

Sovetsky District Prosecutors again summoned Imam Khalilov on 22 April, who was accompanied by his lawyers Nazim Sheikhmambetov and Emil Kurbedinov. Prosecutors told the Imam that they had dropped charges under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4. However, they said they were instead accusing him under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket"), which is linked to Russia's Demonstrations Law.

Prosecutors claimed that "the conducting of Friday prayers does not represent the carrying out of a compulsory religious rite", the lawyer Kurbedinov told the human rights monitoring group Crimean Solidarity the same day, "but rather that people gathered there to hold a meeting."

Because the mosque community has not been re-registered under Russian law, Prosecutors insisted that Friday prayers in the mosque represent an unapproved meeting. Kurbedinov considered it "absurd" that Imam Khalilov should have to go to the Village Council each time to ask permission to hold prayers.

Kurbedinov also pointed to procedural violations, including over Imam Khalilov's request for a translator from Russian into Crimean Tatar. Officials provided a translator. "However, when Dilyaver Khalilov asked for the indictment to be translated for him, the Prosecutor's Office refused."

The lawyer Kurbedinov also complained that the Deputy Prosecutor was secretly filming the interview. "After repeated demands, he stopped his covert filming," Kurbedinov told Crimean Solidarity.

On 29 April, Judge Igor Brazhnik of Sovetsky District Court found Imam Khalilov guilty under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket") and fined him 30,000 Russian Roubles, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. This is about one month's average wage in Crimea for those in formal work.

Alushta: "Brought to court for conducting the juma namaz"

Imam Khalilov "has been brought to court for conducting the juma namaz [Friday prayers] in a mosque which has been functioning for 16 years," the lawyer Kurbedinov told Crimean Solidarity after the 29 April Sovetsky District Court hearing. "And suddenly it turns out that it is not a mosque but some kind of sports complex, and he is not an imam of a mosque but a law-breaker."

Kurbedinov said he had tried unsuccessfully to have brought to court as witnesses those who were present in the mosque on 20 March when it was raided and Village Council officials who had given only written testimony. He had also tried to have called to court

Mufti Emirali Ablayev, head of the Crimean Muftiate, who had been involved in the official formation of the community in 2004.

Another of Imam Khalilov's lawyers, Rustem Kyamilev, had presented documentation to the court showing the community's official registration under Ukrainian law in 2004 and its continuing functioning in the same building over 16 years.

Imam Khalilov's third lawyer, Lilia Hemedzhy, insisted that the Russian authorities are deliberately targeting religious organisations for destruction. She pointed out that Prosecutor Bailema told the court that on 20 March, he and the police came to the mosque "not to prevent, not to stop law-breaking, but to check up on a religious organisation", she told Crimean Solidarity. "This was the main aim."

Hemedzhy noted that the Prosecutor's Office had no information that the mosque was a sports complex. However, they did know that Friday prayers were held there.

Imam Khalilov appealed against the conviction and fine to Crimea's Supreme Court in Simferopol. Lawyer Kurbedinov said outside the court immediately after the 6 July hearing that the decision to leave the lower court decision unchanged was predictable. He complained that the court, which claimed it was an open hearing, had not allowed in the 20 or so men from the mosque community who had hoped to attend. Court officials claimed this was because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Kurbedinov also complained that the decision to reject Imam Khalilov's appeal had already been taken before the hearing. The decision "was lying on the table in sight of the judge. It had already been completed – everything was already decided in advance a long time ago, it seems a month or two ago."

Kurbedinov pledged to take the case to international bodies, including the United Nations human rights bodies.

Alushta: Community challenges threatened mosque seizure

The community of the independent Yuhary-Jami mosque in the southern Crimean town of Alushta is challenging in Russia's Supreme Court a decision to revoke their ownership and declare their mosque building state property.

"The mosque functions, and is still in the hands of the community – thank God," the community's lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 3 August. "The community closed the mosque in March because of the coronavirus pandemic."

The community is challenging a Crimean Council of Ministers decision of 18 September 2018 which handed control of Yuhary-Jami mosque to Crimea's State Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations and Deported Citizens. The community pointed to decisions in 1994 and 1996 which handed the historical mosque to the community.

The community brought the suit also against the Crimean Muslim Board. Community members fear that the authorities wish to transfer the mosque for its use.

On 14 February 2019, Alushta City Court rejected the community's suit against the 2018 decision to overturn their ownership and declare their mosque building state property. On 25 June 2019, Crimea's Supreme Court rejected the community's appeal against this decision.

The community gained legal registration in 1993 under Ukrainian law and re-registration in August 2016 as an independent religious organisation after the Russian annexation of Crimea, according to Russian tax records.

However, the Crimean Supreme Court rejected the community's arguments, insisting that the mosque was state property and that the Crimean Council of Ministers therefore had the right to issue the decision, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18.

The community lodged the case at Russia's Supreme Court on 30 June 2020, but on 6 July the Court returned it, citing "inadequacies" in the appeal, according to court records. The community resubmitted the appeal on 28 July, but the Court has not yet set a date for a hearing.

The community has worshipped in Alushta's 19th century Yukhary-Jami mosque building since 1994. Yusuf Ashirov chaired the community from 2001, and then became Imam in 2014.

"The 1994 decision to grant us the mosque has never been cancelled," Imam Ashirov told Forum 18 in April. "How can they adopt a new decision without cancelling the old?"

Alushta: Punished for "missionary activity" in own mosque

Prosecutors brought an administrative case against Imam Yusuf Ashirov, accusing him of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4, by leading prayers and preaching in Yukhary-Jami mosque. Prosecutors informed him of the charges when they summoned him on 1 April.

Article 5.26, Part 4 punishes "Russians conducting missionary activity". This incurs a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 Roubles. For organisations (legal entities), the fine is 100,000 to 1 million Roubles.

On 10 June, Judge Svetlana Vlasova of Alushta Magistrate's Court No. 22 found Imam Ashirov guilty and fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles, according to court records. This is several days' average wage in Crimea for those in formal work.

On 14 August, Judge Tatyana Zakharova of Alushta City Court rejected Imam Ashirov's appeal against his punishment, according to court records.

Imam Ashirov's lawyer Rustem Kyamilev said after the appeal hearing that he intends to take his client's case further. "The Judge indicated that the basis for rejecting my appeal was that I had not confirmed his responsibilities with appropriate documentation," he told human rights monitoring group Crimean Solidarity. "She similarly left Yusuf Ashirov's own appeal without consideration, claiming that it was incomplete and unfounded."

Lawyer Kyamilev linked the case against Imam Ashirov to other state pressure on Muslim communities not subordinated to the Crimean Muslim Board.

Lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy, who defended community leader Ruslan Emirvaliyev (see below), said FSB officers had prepared the case against Imam Ashirov.

Alushta: Fined for "extremism"

On 14 August, the head of the Alushta mosque community Ruslan Emirvaliyev paid a fine handed down in May for a post on his VKontakte social media page in 2016.

In a video recorded outside a bank, posted online by Crimean Solidarity the same day, Emirvaliyev said that he had been punished for posting a picture of a young boy pointing upwards with his right index finger in front of an Arabic inscription that there is no God but God, and that Muhammad is his prophet. He thanked those who had helped him pay the fine.

Mikhail Didun of Alushta Prosecutor's Office summoned Emirvaliyev in late May to inform him that it had opened an administrative case against him on accusations of promoting "extremism".

Alushta Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Didun on 18 August.

On 28 May, Judge Tatyana Zakharova of Alushta City Court found Emirvaliyev guilty under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.3, Part 1 ("Propaganda of Nazi symbolism or symbolism of an extremist organisation"). She fined him 1,000 Russian Roubles, the minimum punishment under Article 20.3, Part 1. This is about one day's average wage in Crimea for those in formal work.

Emirvaliyev's lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy declared after the hearing that materials in the case had been prepared by the FSB security service and feared that the case was part of a wider move against the mosque. "This administrative case is, I think, the basis for something larger, for the persecution of this community as a whole, for the persecution of people here in Alushta." She said FSB officers had similarly prepared the case against Imam Ashirov.

In his 14 August remarks, Emirvaliyev insisted that the mosque community is "large, unbreakable and indivisible".

Alushta: Justice Ministry demands mosque leader's ousting

On 22 July, Mikhail Nazarov, head of Crimea's Justice Ministry, wrote to the Alushta Muslim community with an official warning about "extremism", citing Russia's 2002 Extremism Law. The warning - seen by Forum 18 - was prepared by Konstantin Yelnikov, a specialist at the Ministry's Non-Commercial Organisations Department.

The Justice Ministry demanded that the community should remove acting leader Emirvaliyev from among the founders, pointing to the 28 May Alushta City Court decision against him. The Justice Ministry gave the mosque community until 30 September to remove Emirvaliyev.

Article 15 of Russia's Extremism Law says that if any leader or member of a public or religious organisation's leadership makes a "public statement calling for the carrying out of extremist activity" and the organisation does not disavow it within five days, this could be seen as "testimony of the presence in [the organisation's] activity of signs of extremism".

The Russian tax record for the mosque community notes that it first gained state registration (under Ukraine) in April 1993. The community was re-registered under Russian law in August 2016. Emirvaliyev is listed as the chair of the religious organisation.

Yelnikov, the specialist at the Non-Commercial Organisations Department, insists that the demand for the mosque community to remove Emirvaliyev is in line with Russian law and the court decision against him. "He can't be among the founders," Yelnikov told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 18 August.

Yelnikov said the mosque community has not appealed against the official warning. "The deadline has not yet run out," he noted.

Ukraine's MFA condemns OCU eviction from cathedral in Russia-occupied Crimea

Over 90 administrative cases against religious organizations in Crimea have been documented.

UNIAN (05.08.2020) - <https://bit.ly/30wQeM9> - The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) condemns the eviction of the community of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) from the Cathedral of the Holy and Equal-to-the-Apostles Volodymyr and Olha in Simferopol.

"This decision by the occupying authorities reflects the policy of systemic oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox community in temporarily occupied Crimea," the ministry said in a statement on August 5.

Only a week ago, the Russian occupying administration handed over to Archbishop Klyment an order on the demolition of the temple in Yevpatoria, the ministry said. In the course of the last year, the occupying administration detained Archbishop Klyment himself without justification in March, refused to register the local religious organization following his application in April, and terminated the lease of the premises of the acting cathedral in June. In July 2019, all the church utensils of the diocesan administration were stolen from this cathedral under the guise of building renovation.

"Oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox community in Crimea aims at erasing the Ukrainian identity on the temporarily occupied territories and is a part of the policy of oppression of all religious communities in Crimea uncontrolled by Moscow," the ministry said.

The largest-scaled oppression is unfolded against the Crimean Muslims. According to human rights defenders, 71 Crimeans of Muslim confession are behind bars under the fabricated charges.

Contrary to international humanitarian law, the Russian Federation extended the application of its legislation to Ukrainian Crimea thus outlawing about 8,000 followers of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The occupying administration imprisoned two members of that community for their religious beliefs.

"The Russian occupying administration in Crimea abuses the anti-extremist legislation and uses the administrative legislation to the effect of oppressing the religious communities. Administrative pressure is being exercised not only against the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This year, the fines for missionary activities were issued to the rabbi of the Jewish Messianic community and imam of the Alushta Muslim community," the ministry said.

Overall, since the beginning of the occupation, human rights defenders have documented 91 administrative cases against religious organizations and their members in Crimea, resulting in 73 administrative fines for a total amount exceeding 1 million Russian rubles (about US\$13,700).

Only Orthodox churches controlled by the Moscow Patriarch enjoy freedom from obstacles to their religious activities.

"We call on Russian Federation as an occupying power to abide by the norms of international law, including the international humanitarian law, and to stop the oppression of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and other religious communities in Crimea," the ministry said.

CRIMEA: Third jailing as second Jehovah's Witness jailed

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (10.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2zCvg46> - In the third jailing in Russian-occupied Crimea on "extremism" charges to punish the exercise of freedom of religion and belief, Jehovah's Witness Artyom Gerasimov was jailed for six years after a prosecutor appealed against an earlier fine. Jailed earlier were Muslim Renat Suleimanov for four years and Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov for six years. Like Suleimanov and Filatov, Gerasimov expects to be sent to a prison in Russia.

For the third time, a court in Russian-occupied Crimea has jailed an individual on "extremism" charges to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief. After an appeal by the prosecutor, on 4 June Crimea's Supreme Court changed the punishment imposed on 35-year-old Artyom Gerasimov from a fine of two years' average wages to a six-year jail term. He was arrested in the courtroom. He was the second Crimean Jehovah's Witness to be jailed.

The decision to make prisoner of conscience Gerasimov's punishment harsher without sending the case for a retrial is the first such instance in any Jehovah's Witness case in Crimea, or in Russia within its internationally recognised borders.

The first such jailing for exercising freedom of religion and belief was Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov. In January 2019 a Simferopol court [jailed him for four years on "extremism"-related charges for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith](#).

In May 2019, the prison authorities [transferred prisoner of conscience Suleimanov to a labour camp in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Region](#). He has complained to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, arguing that the transfer to another state was illegal. In January 2020, he completed [six months in a punishment cell for an alleged conflict with another prisoner which his lawyer insists was fabricated](#).

The second such jailing in Crimea was of Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov. On 5 March he was jailed for meeting with family and friends to discuss religious themes. On 26 May he failed to overturn his six-year prison term and other post-jail restrictions on appeal at Crimea's Supreme Court (see below).

Prison authorities began the transfer of prisoner of conscience Filatov to a prison camp in Russia on 8 June, two days after his 48th birthday. As Gerasimov's sentence has now also come into force he, like his fellow prisoners of conscience Filatov and Suleimanov, is likely to be sent to serve his sentence in Russia (see below).

The Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War [covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state \(described as "protected persons"\)](#). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of

offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein."

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

Criminal convictions and jailings or fines of Jehovah's Witnesses within Russia's internationally recognised borders [are widespread](#). On 9 June 2020, a Pskov court jailed Gennady Shpakovsky for six and a half years, the longest jail term so far on a Jehovah's Witness (see forthcoming F18News article).

Within the annexed territory of Crimea, the imposition of a jail term on Gerasimov came as another Jehovah's Witness, 53-year-old Viktor Stashevsky, is on trial in the port city of Sevastopol facing "extremism"-related charges. He too faces a possible long prison term if convicted (see below).

Like Filatov, Gerasimov and Suleimanov, Stashevsky faces charges under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. This punishes "Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity". The maximum punishment is 10 years' imprisonment.

In the early morning of 26 May, separate groups of up to 10 armed police and OMON riot police officers in masks raided five homes in the eastern Crimean city of Kerch. They interrogated at least seven people – including several elderly people – accusing them of being Jehovah's Witnesses. Investigators opened a criminal case against 29-year-old Artyom Shably an hour before the early morning raid (see below).

"Extremist" organisations banned

Russia's Supreme Court [banned the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat as "extremist" in 2009](#). The Russian ban was imposed in Crimea after Russia annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014. The charges against prisoner of conscience Suleimanov related to membership of Tabligh Jamaat.

Russia's Supreme Court [banned Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" in 2017](#). More than 350 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted, are on trial or are being investigated on "extremism"-related criminal charges, of whom more than 20 are in pre-trial detention.

Following Russia's March 2014 occupation of Crimea, the Russian authorities granted re-registration to [all 22 Jehovah's Witness communities in Crimea. But in 2017 they were banned following the Russian Supreme Court ban](#).

Gerasimov: Minimum fine turned into six year jail term

On 5 March, Yalta City Court convicted Crimean Jehovah's Witness, Artyom Vyacheslavovich Gerasimov (born 13 January 1985), on "extremism"-related criminal charges, "merely for meeting with others to discuss the Bible".

Prosecutor Oksana Chuchuyeva had [asked for a jail term of six and a half years, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a three-year ban on unspecified activities. Judge Vladimir Romanenko fined Gerasimov 400,000 Roubles, the minimum fine under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 equivalent to two years' average wages. No other punishment appears to have been imposed](#).

In court, Gerasimov insisted on his innocence, arguing that he had not been involved in any activities of the local Jehovah's Witness organisation after its liquidation in 2017.

Both Gerasimov and the Prosecutor's Office appealed against the punishment to Crimea's Supreme Court in Simferopol. Gerasimov sought the overturning of his conviction as he does not consider himself guilty of any crime. Prosecutor Chuchuyeva appealed "because of the mildness of the verdict" and repeated her demand for a six-and-a-half-year jail term.

The first hearing was due on 19 May. It was then rescheduled for 4 June. Gerasimov was originally assigned a court-nominated lawyer. He rejected the lawyer's services and chose to defend himself at the appeal hearing.

Gerasimov's supporters came to the Supreme Court in Simferopol for the 4 June hearing, but court officials did not let them in, the Crimean Human Rights Group noted the same day.

On 4 June, Judge Aleksei Posledov rejected Gerasimov's appeal, but almost completely accepted Prosecutor Chuchuyeva's appeal for a six-and-a-half-year jail term. The Judge changed Gerasimov's punishment from a fine to a prison term of six years. As the sentence then came into force, officers arrested him in the court room and took him away to begin serving his sentence.

As prisoner of conscience Gerasimov did not spend time in pre-trial detention or under house arrest, he will be required to spend the full six years in prison. His release is therefore due in June 2026.

Yalta Prosecutor's Office refused to put Forum 18 through to Prosecutor Chuchuyeva or to the head of the Office Maksim Yudin on 5 June.

Gerasimov is planning to appeal further, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Any further appeal would be heard at the 4th Cassational Court, which is based in the Russian city of Krasnodar.

Now his sentence has come into force, Gerasimov is likely to be sent to serve his sentence in Russia. At the moment he is being held at Simferopol's Investigation Prison.

Filatov: Crimea's Supreme Court rejects appeal against six year jail term

The first Crimean Jehovah's Witness jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief, Sergei Viktorovich Filatov (born 6 June 1972) who is from the town of Dzhankoi, failed to overturn his six-year prison term and other post-jail restrictions on appeal at Crimea's Supreme Court on 26 May, according to court records. The Prosecutor was Sergei Novoselchuk.

Prisoner of conscience Filatov had been [accused of continuing the activities of the banned local Jehovah's Witness community. The FSB security service secretly bugged his home and claimed that a 10 October 2017 gathering in his home with family and friends where they discussed the Bible was evidence of this.](#)

Filatov was [convicted at Dzhankoi District Court on 5 March 2020 under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 \("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"\).](#)

The Judge [handed Filatov not only the six-year prison term, but a post-prison five-year ban on engaging in educational activity, "activities relating to speeches and publications in mass media", and posting information on the internet, and one year of unspecified restrictions on freedom.](#)

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Filatov was not brought from Simferopol's Investigation Prison to the Supreme Court for the appeal hearing, which took place by video. The Court did not allow his family or friends to attend the two-hour hearing, the Crimean Process human rights group noted.

Filatov's defence argued at the Supreme Court appeal that the case was full of "inconsistencies and falsifications". The defence complained that "the investigation illegally changed the evidence in the case, involved false witnesses and experts who did not provide diplomas confirming their competence". However, the Judges rejected the defence arguments and refused to hear testimony from witnesses the defence wished to put forward.

The Supreme Court also refused to take into account the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention Opinion, adopted on 1 May, [condemning the raids, arrests, detention and trials of 18 Jehovah's Witnesses on similar charges within Russia's internationally recognised boundaries.](#)

Filatov's sentence came into force at the appeal hearing on 26 May when the presiding Judge Eduard Belousov had finished reading the verdict. As Filatov spent from 5 March in Investigation Prison after the verdict was handed down, he is due for release on 23 January 2026, Jehovah's Witnesses calculate.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Prosecutor Novoselchuk either at Crimea's Prosecutor's Office or at his office at the Supreme Court where he generally works.

Filatov is planning to appeal further, his lawyer Oleg Zakharchuk told Radio Free Europe's Krym.Realii after the Supreme Court verdict was handed down. Any further appeal would be heard at the 4th Cassational Court, which is based in the Russian city of Krasnodar.

In January 2019, Filatov was added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (although small transactions are permitted). Filatov told Forum 18 that as he does not have a bank account the authorities could not freeze it.

At 7 am on 8 June, prison authorities began the transfer of Filatov from Simferopol's Investigation Prison to Russia's Krasnodar Region, Jehovah's Witnesses said. The authorities have not said in which labour camp he will serve his sentence.

Stashevsky: Another trial, another possible long sentence

Another Crimean Jehovah's Witness, Viktor Vladimirovich Stashevsky (born 11 July 1966), is on trial in the port city of Sevastopol facing "extremism"-related charges. He too faces a possible long prison term if convicted.

The FSB security service [launched a criminal case against Stashevsky on 31 May 2019 under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 \("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"\).](#)

The FSB claimed that Stashevsky had "continued the activity and propagated the ideas of Jehovah's Witnesses, conducted meetings, and held religious talks".

On 4 June 2019, without showing any warrants, the FSB [raided nine homes in Sevastopol, including that of a 91-year-old woman. Officers threatened to plant drugs in the homes, Jehovah's Witnesses stated.](#)

After being held overnight in a detention centre, the investigator allowed Stashevsky to be freed under a pledge not to leave the city.

On 11 July 2019, the investigator had Stashevsky added to the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose assets banks are obliged to freeze (although small transactions are permitted).

FSB Investigator F. Rybalka [completed the criminal case on 21 February 2020](#). He described Stashevsky as "the ideological inspirer of the extremist organisation, using his authority, well-developed strong-willed qualities and organisational abilities, as well as special knowledge and propaganda skills he had previously acquired".

Investigator Rybalka claimed that Stashevsky "deliberately took active organisational actions with the aim of continuing the unlawful activities of an extremist organisation prohibited by the court".

The case against Stashevsky reached Sevastopol's Gagarin District Court on 30 March, where it was assigned to Judge Valentin Norets. A preliminary hearing was held on 13 May, according to court records. The defence argued that Stashevsky is being prosecuted solely because of his religious convictions, which violates his Constitutional rights.

Stashevsky complained that he had not been given enough time to review the case against him. Judge Norets rebuked the Prosecutor, Jehovah's Witnesses noted.

Stashevsky's trial is due to resume on the morning of 15 June, according to court records.

Kerch: Armed raids on five homes – without a warrant?

In the early morning of 26 May, separate groups of seven to 10 armed police and OMON riot police officers in masks raided five homes in the eastern Crimean city of Kerch, claiming to be conducting a "survey of premises, buildings and facilities", Jehovah's Witnesses noted. In one case, officers broke down the entrance gate.

Officers questioned at least seven people – including several elderly people – accusing them of being Jehovah's Witnesses.

Officers searching the five homes for up to three hours and seized documents, publications and electronic devices. In no case did they show a court order authorising the raids, nor did they provide a record of the "survey".

The OMON riot police in Kerch is subject to the National Guard (Rosgvardiya), a force directly subject to the Russian President. The man who answered the phone refused to answer any questions about the 26 May raids. "We didn't participate," he claimed to Forum 18 from Kerch on 5 June. He then referred all enquiries to the National Guard spokesperson in Simferopol and put the phone down.

The National Guard spokesperson, who gave his name only as Anton, refused to answer any questions about the raids by phone on 9 and 10 June.

Officials at Kerch Police repeatedly refused to put Forum 18 through to the Police Chief Aleksandr Voronov. They referred Forum 18 to its spokesperson. However, the spokesperson refused to answer any questions about the raids on 8 June, insisting that all questions must be sent in writing to Crimea's Interior Ministry in Simferopol.

One home raided was that of 29-year-old Artyom Shably, who lives with his wife, their two young children, and his mother. Officers broke the window in the hallway to gain entrance. Shably's four-year-old son cut his foot on the broken glass lying on the floor.

Officers put Shably in handcuffs, forcing him to stand with his head against the wall for several hours in light clothing in the cold wind through the door and broken window before taking him away. He remained in handcuffs for several hours.

Officers took Shably and four others from their homes to the Investigative Department for interrogation. Officers removed the handcuffs from Shably only after the interrogation, but he remained in detention. The other four were freed after about two hours.

Kerch: Criminal case

Investigative Committee Investigator for Especially Important Cases in Kerch, Major Valery Zarubin, had launched a case against Shably under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.1 ("Inclination, recruitment or other involvement of a person in an extremist organisation"). Zarubin accused him of "attracting others into the activity of an extremist organisation" by talking to him about the Bible. He threatened him with an eight-year jail term.

While Shably was in detention, officers summoned his wife for interrogation. "The Investigator tried to pressure her, threatening to imprison her husband," Jehovah's Witnesses said. Officers released her later that day.

Later on 26 May, officers placed Shably in a detention centre. Only on the evening of 28 May, after 48 hours, did they free him. He had to sign a pledge that as a suspect he would present himself when ordered to do so.

Forum 18 was unable to find out why Major Zarubin lodged a criminal case against Shably for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief. The telephone at the Investigative Committee in Kerch went unanswered each time Forum 18 called between 5 and 10 June.

CRIMEA: JW Artem Gerasimov: six years in prison

JW.ORG (04.06.2020) - On 4 June, the Crimean Supreme Court sentenced Artem Gerasimov to six years in prison for his peaceful Christian worship as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was seeking acquittal from his original sentence by the Yalta City Court, which was a fine for 400,000 rubles. Today's ruling immediately came into force and Artem was taken into custody.

Jarrold Lopes, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, states: "Today's ruling by the Crimean Supreme Court brings religious persecution to a new level of cruelty. Since the 2017

Russian Supreme Court's ruling that effectively banned Jehovah's Witnesses, this is the first time an appeal has resulted in a more severe punishment. This bleak development in Crimea is the latest example of Russia exporting its patently extreme religious intolerance. Human rights advocates across the globe have publicly criticized Russia for its baseless attack on Jehovah's Witnesses, internationally recognized as peaceful, societally responsible Christians. We hope that senior officials in Russia will soon correct the injustice being doled out in their local courts and that judges in Crimea will follow suit."

Artem is the second one of Jehovah's Witnesses to be imprisoned in Crimea under Russian law. Artem's new sentence now matches the sentence of Sergey Filatov, who was likewise convicted on March 5, 2020, but by the Dzhankoysky District Court.

HRWF Comment

Crimea has been de facto under Russian rule since its annexation in 2014 although it is still de jure part of Ukraine.

[Read on hrwf.org](http://www.hrwf.org)

CRIMEA: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Crimea under Russian rule (April)

Crimea Human Rights Group (22.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3doVMMR> - On April 1, the "prosecutor" of Alushta opened administrative proceedings against Mr. **Yusuf Ashirov**, the imam of the "Alushta" religious community, for "illegal missionary activity" under Article 5.26-4 of the Code of Administrative Offences of the Russian Federation (RF CoAO) (*Illegal missionary activity*). The reason for this was holding Friday prayers, (27), a traditional rite for Muslims.

On April 22, it became known that Mr. **Diliaver Khalilov**, the imam of the Sovetsky District of Crimea, had been called up to the "Prosecutor's Office", where he had been charged of RF CoAO Article 20.2-2 (*organization of an unauthorized public event*) for holding Friday prayers. The lawyer said that initially there had been an attempt to convict the imam under RF CoAO Article 5.26- 4, but then the qualification was changed. The 'Prosecutor's Office' stated that the imam had not re-registered the mosque building under Russian laws after 2014, so the mosque building was a sports complex (28). On April 29, Igor Brazhnik, a judge of ' Sovetsky District Court', fined Mr. Khalilov (29) RUR30,000. (30)

In April the CHRГ documented 3 new administrative procedures against the religious organizations of Crimea under RF CoAO Article 5.26-3. On April 21 judge Artem Cherkashyn fined the **Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Bakhchisaray District** RUR30,000, (31), on April 22 judge Ullubiy Isayev fined the **"Light to World" Church of the Evangelical Christians from Yalta** RUR30,000 (32). The case of the **'Jewish Religious Community of Simferopol City'** is still being considered. (33)

27. CHRГ / 'Prosecutor's Office Accused Imam in Alushta of 'Illegal Missnary Activity'

<https://bit.ly/2ZVEx1R>

28. <https://bit.ly/2ZWKADa>

29. «Sovetsky District Court» / List of cases to be heard on 29 April 2020. Case 5-118,2020 -

<https://bit.ly/2MkeysM>

30. <https://bit.ly/3gHJSQf>

31. «Judges of peace of Republic of Crimea» / Case 05-0162/28/2020 <http://mirsud82.rk.gov.ru>

32. «Judges of peace of Republic of Crimea» / Case 05-0117/28/2020 <http://mirsud82.rk.gov.ru>

CRIMEA: Prosecuting worship as "illegal missionary activity"

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (07.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2JSIScY> - Prosecutors in Alushta brought a case against Imam Yusuf Ashirov on 1 April of conducting "illegal missionary activity" by leading Friday prayers. Imam Dilyaver Khalilov faces a similar case after police and plain clothes officials raided the mosque just after Friday prayers. A Simferopol court similarly fined Imam Rasim Dervishev. "It is absurd to require anyone to ask permission to conduct religious rituals," his lawyer Ayder Azamatov insists.

In one of three such cases so far in 2020, Prosecutors in Russian-occupied Crimea are pursuing an administrative case over "illegal missionary activity" to punish an imam for leading regular Friday prayers in a mosque. Prosecutors in the southern town of Alushta brought a case against Imam Yusuf Ashirov on 1 April of conducting such "illegal missionary activity" since July 2019.

Imam Ashirov explained to the deputy prosecutor that he had preached in the mosque solely to other mosque members and had not explained his faith to others. "I have no desire to break the law," he told Forum 18.

"Being the imam of an officially-registered community, he carried out the hutba [sermon] on Fridays among his fellow believers, mosque members," Imam Ashirov's lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy told the Crimean Solidarity monitoring group. "This is not 'illegal missionary activity'" (see below).

The prosecution relates to worship before the coronavirus outbreak. Imam Ashirov and the community halted public worship in late March. The Crimean Muslim Board similarly decided on 23 March to halt all public worship in its mosques.

The community gained legal registration in 1993 under Ukrainian law and re-registration in 2016 after the Russian annexation of Crimea. It has worshipped in the town's 19th century Yukhary-Jami mosque building since 1994. However, the mosque community has been trying to challenge the authorities' decision to overturn their ownership and declare their mosque building state property (see below).

Two of the mosque's official founders were among eight Crimean Tatars arrested in June 2019. They are facing criminal charges for alleged membership of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organisation.

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

The Prosecutor of Sovetskoe District in eastern Crimea summoned mosque leader Dilyaver Khalilov on 1 April for questioning about a prosecution for "illegal missionary activity". The summons came less than two weeks after police and plain clothes officials raided the mosque in the village of Zavetnoe just after Friday prayers finished. However, the summons was then cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak. A police officer who took part in the raid refused to discuss it with Forum 18 (see below).

Meanwhile, on 2 March a Magistrate's Court in Crimea's capital Simferopol fined Imam Rasim Dervishev for leading Friday prayers. Prosecutors brought the case of "illegal missionary activity" after a December 2019 raid by Russian security forces just after prayers concluded at the mosque (see below).

"It is absurd to require anyone to ask permission to conduct religious rituals," his lawyer Ayder Azamatov told Forum 18 from Simferopol. "Imam Dervishev decided not to appeal against the punishment and paid the fine" (see below).

"Missionary" prosecutions frequent

In Russian-occupied Crimea in 2019, there were [24 prosecutions brought against 23 individuals and 1 community for ill-defined "missionary activity", of which 17 ended with punishment](#), Forum 18 found. All 17 were fined about five days' average local wage each. Many of those punished were prosecuted for holding worship at unapproved venues or for sharing their faith on the street.

There were also [11 cases brought in Crimea in 2019 against 10 religious communities and 1 individual to punish them for failing to use the full legal name of a registered religious community on their place of worship or on literature](#). Four of these 11 cases ended with fines of one month's average local wages each, and 2 defendants received a warning. The other 5 cases ended with no punishment.

In addition, the Russian authorities have used "extremism"-related criminal prosecutions in Crimea to punish the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov is serving a four-year jail term in a labour camp in Russia as a member of the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat after meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith. In January 2020 he [completed a six-month term in the labour camp punishment cell](#). Three others convicted with him were given suspended sentences.

On 5 March, [two Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted in separate "extremism"-related criminal cases](#). A court in Dzhankoi jailed Sergei Filatov for six years with an additional five years' additional restrictions. A court in Yalta fined Artyom Gerasimov about two years' average salary for those in work. Further criminal cases against Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses are underway.

Alushta: "This is not 'illegal missionary activity'"

On 1 April, the deputy prosecutor in the southern Crimean town of Alushta summoned by telephone Imam Yusuf Ashirov, Imam of the town's independent Yukhary-Jami mosque. Only once he had arrived there did the deputy prosecutor tell him that an administrative case had been launched against him under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4, Imam Ashirov told Forum 18 from Alushta on 7 April. The deputy prosecutor handed him the indictment, signed by the town's Prosecutor Sergei Brodsky.

Article 5.26, Part 4 punishes "Russians conducting missionary activity". This incurs a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 Roubles. For organisations (legal entities), the fine is 100,000 to 1 million Roubles.

Imam Ashirov explained to the deputy prosecutor that he had preached in the mosque solely to other mosque members and had not explained his faith to others. "I have no desire to break the law," he told Forum 18. He asked prosecutors to bring in a religious specialist who could explain his actions as a preacher.

"Yusuf Ashirov was deprived of the opportunity of being represented," his lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy told the Crimean Solidarity monitoring group on 1 April, "deprived of the right to have the services of a defender."

"Being the imam of an officially-registered community, he carried out the hutba [sermon] on Fridays among his fellow believers, mosque members," Hemedzhy insisted. "This is not 'illegal missionary activity' as the law defines 'illegal missionary activity' as activity directed at spreading one's faith among individuals of other faiths, or among individuals who are not adherents of the given faith."

Prosecutors deemed the "offences" to have taken place since 25 July 2019, Hemedzhy told Crimean Solidarity.

Imam Ashirov also complained that prosecutors had potentially endangered his and his family's health by summoning him to the Prosecutor's Office during the coronavirus outbreak.

The telephone at Alushta Prosecutor's Office went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 April.

Alushta: Seizing mosque from community

Prosecutors' decision to deem Imam Ashirov's "offences" to have taken place since 25 July 2019 is significant. On 25 June 2019, exactly one month earlier, Crimea's Supreme Court had rejected the community's appeal against Alushta City Court's decision on 14 February 2019 to reject its appeal against a decision to overturn their ownership and declare their mosque building state property.

The community has worshipped in Alushta's 19th century Yukhary-Jami mosque building since 1994. Ashirov chaired the community from 2001, and then became Imam in 2014.

The community gained legal registration in 1993 under Ukrainian law and re-registration in August 2016 as an independent religious organisation after the Russian annexation of Crimea, according to Russian tax records.

The community sought to challenge a Crimean Council of Ministers decision of 18 September 2018 which handed control of Yukhary-Jami mosque to Crimea's State Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations and Deported Citizens. The community pointed to decisions in 1994 and 1996 which handed the historic mosque to the community.

The community brought the suit also against the Crimean Muslim Board. Community members fear that the authorities wish to transfer the mosque for its use.

However, the Supreme Court rejected the community's arguments, insisting that the mosque was state property and that the Crimean Council of Ministers therefore had the right to issue the decision, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18.

"The 1994 decision to grant us the mosque has never been cancelled," Imam Ashirov told Forum 18. "How can they adopt a new decision without cancelling the old?"

Imam Ashirov noted though that nothing had changed following the June 2019 Supreme Court decision. "We continued to function as an independent mosque, with regular prayers, until we had to halt worship in March because of coronavirus."

Sovetskoe: Imam's summons cancelled

The Prosecutor of Sovetskoe District in eastern Crimea, Dmitry Bailema, summoned mosque leader Dilyaver Khalilov for questioning on 1 April, according to the summons seen by Forum 18. The summons related to a prosecution under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") following an "inspection" on the mosque in the village of Zavetnoe.

However, the summons was then cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak, the lawyer Lilia Hemedzhy told Forum 18 on 7 April.

Prosecutor Bailema's phone went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 7 April.

The summons came less than two weeks after officials raided the mosque. Police and plain clothes officials arrived at the mosque just after Friday prayers on 20 March, mosque members told Crimean Solidarity the same day. They prevented worshippers from leaving and questioned them.

Officers told mosque members they were conducting an investigation about alleged "missionary activity", reading out the relevant Article 24.2 of Russia's Religion Law. They pressured the Imam to write a statement and promised they would later be in contact with him. Only one of the police officers, Valentin Shostak, gave his name.

Forum 18 reached police officer Shostak on 7 April, but he put the phone down as soon as it asked him about the raid.

The mosque first gained registration with the Ukrainian authorities in 2000.

Simferopol: "Missionary" fine follows raid

On 2 March, Judge Yelena Klepova of Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 13 found Imam Rasim Dervishev guilty of violating Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") by preaching and leading the namaz in the mosque. She fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles, about five days' average local wage, according to court records.

"It is absurd to require anyone to ask permission to conduct religious rituals," his lawyer Ayder Azamatov told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 7 April. "Imam Dervishev decided not to appeal against the punishment and paid the fine."

Police and FSB security service officers, as well as officials from the Prosecutors Office and the Emergency Situations Ministry, raided the mosque just after prayers concluded on 3 December 2019, Azamatov noted.

The Deputy Prosecutor of Simferopol's Kiev District Andrei Gritsaichuk then brought a case against Imam Dervishev. On 14 January 2020, he [handed the case to Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 13](#). Several hearings took place in the case before Judge Klepova issued her decision on 2 March.

Azamatov argued in court that the Imam should not be punished for leading Friday prayers as no proof had been presented that Imam Dervishev had spoken to anyone outside the mosque about his religious beliefs.

At a hearing in the case on 29 January, a witness Dzhelyaylov claimed that the interrogation record contained statements he had never made. He testified that he had never witnessed Imam Dervishev inviting any non-community member to join. Other witnesses testified that they too had not witnessed that.

After viewing a video of Imam Dervishev preaching, a religious studies expert, Bulatov, similarly told the 29 January hearing that he could see no evidence of any missionary activity.

Other "missionary" fines

Several other individuals have been prosecuted in 2020 under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity").

On 10 March, Judge Tayana Protsenko of Magistrate's Court No. 9 in Simferopol fined N. Aslanov 5,000 Russian Roubles, about five days' average local wages, according to court records.

On 11 March, Judge Alime Ametova of Magistrate's Court No. 40 in Yevpatoria fined Messianic Rabbi Viktor Vilensky, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. He was accused of conducting "missionary activity" by leading meetings for worship in the city of Sevastopol, while his community is registered in the Republic of Crimea, a separate jurisdiction.

CRIMEA: A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to six years in prison

By Jarrod Lopez (*)

HRWF (05.03.2020) - On 5 March, the Dzhankovsky District Court of the Republic of Crimea convicted Sergey Filatov and sentenced him to six years in prison. He is the first one of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea to be convicted for the peaceful exercise of his beliefs since the 2017 Russian Supreme Court ruling that effectively banned the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and Crimea. Sergey and his wife, Natalya, have four children, two of whom are minors. He will appeal the conviction.

Jarrod Lopes, a spokesman for the world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses, states: "We are deeply disturbed that the court sentenced Sergey to prison for six years, separating him from his wife and children. He is the first one of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea to be convicted for so-called extremist activity. This bleak development in Crimea is the latest example of Russia exporting its patently extreme religious intolerance. Human rights advocates across the globe have publicly criticized Russia for its baseless attack on Jehovah's Witnesses, internationally recognized as peaceful, societally responsible Christians. We hope that senior officials in Russia will soon correct the injustice being doled out in their local courts and that judges in Crimea will follow suit."

Filatov Case Details

Sergey Filatov was first arrested in what was one of the largest special operations against Jehovah's Witnesses in recent years. On the night of November 16, 2018, some 200 officers raided eight homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the area. More than 35 law-enforcement officers searched Sergey's home, and about half of them were armed special forces soldiers. Sergey was questioned and then released.

This morning, the court sentenced him to prison because the prosecution claimed that he "undermines the foundations of constitutional order and the security of the state." Yet all he is accused of is reading the Bible together with his friends in his own home.

The Filatov case is rife with falsifications. On the date (October 10, 2017) the investigators alleged a religious service was held in Filatov's home, there actually was no such service, as proven by telephone records. The investigators unlawfully altered evidence; experts for the case did not present their credentials, as required by law; one of the witnesses for the prosecution gave false testimony, as proven by the testimony of other witnesses.

"It is sad that the massive repression of faith, which has been unleashed by security services in dozens of regions of Russia, has reached Crimea," states Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses. "Sergey Filatov was convicted of a grave criminal offense, as a dangerous enemy of the state, for a simple family worship service. The case is obviously trumped up. The investigation did not try to conceal its falsifications in the case, and the court clearly sympathized with the prosecution."

Sergey Filatov is the 30th Jehovah's Witness convicted in modern Russia and Crimea since 2017. His verdict was a consequence of the Supreme Court's decision to liquidate all 22 local religious organizations (LROs) of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea. In the less than 2 years of the LROs existence, they never received any fines, warnings, or other claims from the authorities.

Gerasimov Case

Shortly following Sergey's conviction, the Yalta City Court of the Republic of Crimea convicted Artem Gerasimov and fined him 400,000 rubles (over \$6,000 U.S.). Artem was temporarily detained and interrogated on March 20, 2019, after Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided eight homes of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Crimean cities of Alupka and Yalta. During the searches, officers seized computers and other electronic devices along with Bibles. Subsequently, FSB investigators charged Artem with organizing extremist activities, merely for meeting with others to discuss the Bible. Artem will appeal his conviction.

Criminalization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea (Since 2017)

Convicted and sentenced to prison: 10
Pretrial detention: 26
Total convicted: 31
Total still under investigation: 316

Jarrold Lopes
Communications Officer and Spokesman
Office of Public Information | Newsroom
World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses
New York, USA

CRIMEA: "Unjustifiable to jail someone for reading the Bible"

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (05.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VNCjnK> - Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov was today sentenced to six years jail with an additional five years additional restrictions, and

his co-believer Artyom Gerasimov was in a separate trial fined about two year's average salary. "I'm outraged, because it is unjustifiable to jail someone for reading the Bible," Filatov told Forum 18 before the sentence.

Two men from Yalta and Dzhankoi have become the first Jehovah's Witnesses in Russian-occupied Crimea to be convicted under Russia's Extremism Law for exercising their freedom of religion and belief. Today (5 March), the District Court in the northern Crimean town of Dzhankoi sentenced 47-year-old Sergei Filatov to six years in a labour camp ("general-regime prison colony"). The City Court in the southern Crimean town of Yalta fined 35-year-old Artyom Gerasimov 400,000 Roubles, or about two year's average salary for those in work.

Prisoner of conscience Filatov was taken into custody straight from the courtroom. He intends to appeal, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 5 March. Prisoner of conscience Filatov told Forum 18 that he was expecting the jail sentence. "I'm outraged, because it is unjustifiable to jail someone for reading the Bible," he told Forum 18 three days before the sentence (see below).

Filatov's six-year jail term will be followed by a five-year ban on engaging in educational activity, "activities relating to speeches and publications in mass media", and posting information on the internet, and one year of unspecified restrictions on freedom, according to the Dzhankoi District Court website. Such restrictions typically include being unable to leave one's home town, move house, or change one's job without informing probation authorities.

In his final court statement, prisoner of conscience Filatov said: "The prosecution claims that .. I conducted a service in my house, namely, I sang songs of praise to God, said a prayer, [and] read and discussed the Book of the Prophet Daniel, as well as scriptural publications and videos. And this is my 'extremism'! And this despite the fact that not one of the songs, not one of the videos, and even less so the Book of the Prophet Daniel, is banned in Russia!"

"This [legal] process .. makes it completely impossible to understand how, from the point of view of the prosecutor's office, I should behave as a law-abiding citizen professing the Jehovah's Witness religion, in order .. to satisfy my spiritual needs and realise my inalienable fundamental rights to freedom of conscience and religion".

Gerasimov was fined 400,000 Roubles, the minimum fine under Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 1 equivalent to two years average wages "merely for meeting with others to discuss the Bible". No other punishment appears to have been imposed, and he intends to challenge his conviction, Jehovah's Witnesses say (see below).

In his final statement to the Court, Gerasimov stated that one investigator "repeatedly stated that in Russia there is not a single prohibited religion, but at the same time he considers my conversation about the Bible in the park to be illegal". "Therefore", Gerasimov continued, "the investigation allows only the first part of Article 28 [of the Russian Constitution] to be used, which states that I have the right to choose and have a faith, but prohibits the use of the second part .. to profess and act in accordance with my convictions" (see below).

Filatov and Gerasimov had been charged under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 1 ("Organisation of the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity"). In January 2019, Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov was jailed for four years, also under Article 282.2 Part 1, for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss

their faith (see below).

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

Criminal convictions and jailings or fines of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are widespread.

Prisoner of conscience Filatov was jailed at the 22nd hearing in his trial. Only three or four of these hearings were open to the public. "About 100 of my friends came to support me at each hearing, standing outside the court," he told Forum 18 from Dzhankoi on 2 March, three days before his 5 March conviction (see below).

Prosecutor Aleksandr Onishchuk demanded that Filatov be given a strict regime jail term of seven years. On 4 March Onishchuk refused to discuss with Forum 18 why he thinks Filatov deserved conviction and such a long sentence (see below).

Two other Jehovah's Witnesses in Russian-occupied Crimea face "extremism"-related criminal charges. Russian state officials again raided the home of one of them, Taras Kuzio, on 13 February. An FSB security service official present during the raid put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked why it had been launched (see below).

"It is sad that the massive repression of faith, which has been unleashed by security services in dozens of regions of Russia, has reached Crimea," Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Yaroslav Sivulskiy stated on 5 March. "Sergei Filatov was convicted of a grave criminal offence, as a dangerous enemy of the state, for a simple family worship service. The case is obviously trumped up. The investigation did not try to conceal its falsifications in the case, and the court clearly sympathised with the prosecution".

First Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses to be convicted

Gerasimov and Filatov are the first Jehovah's Witnesses convicted in Russian-occupied Crimea on "extremism"-related criminal charges to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Both Gerasimov and Filatov were jailed under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. In both cases the Russian FSB security service initiated the criminal cases. Neither was held in pre-trial detention, but both were under travel restrictions, having to sign pledges not to leave the area as the cases were being investigated and once the trials began.

Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 punishes "Organisation of" and Part 2 punishes "participation in" "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity". The maximum punishment under Part 1 of this Article is 10 years' imprisonment.

Dzhankoi Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov jailed

On 5 March, Judge Mariya Yermakova at Dzhankoi District Court found Crimean Jehovah's Witness Sergei Viktorovich Filatov (born 6 June 1972) guilty of "continuing the activities of a banned extremist organisation".

Prisoner of conscience Filatov was jailed at the 22nd hearing in his trial. Only three or four of these hearings were open to the public. "About 100 of my friends came to support me at each hearing, standing outside the court," he told Forum 18 from Dzhankoi on 2

March, three days before his 5 March conviction.

Filatov was taken into custody directly from the courtroom, and will remain in detention while his appeal is pending.

Prisoner of conscience Filatov's six-year labour camp term will be followed by a five-year ban on engaging in educational activity, "activities relating to speeches and publications in mass media", and posting information on the internet, and one year of unspecified restrictions on freedom, according to the Dzhankoi District Court website. Such restrictions typically include being unable to leave one's home town, move house, or change one's job without informing probation authorities.

Prosecutor Aleksandr Onishchuk had demanded that Filatov be given a strict regime jail term of seven years. On 4 March, the day before the verdict was handed down, Onishchuk refused to discuss why he thinks Filatov deserved a conviction and long sentence. "It will be necessary for you to study the verdict once it is handed down," he told Forum 18 from Dzhankoi. As of 5 March, no written verdict is yet publicly available.

Asked whether he had been told what sentence to demand, Prosecutor Onishchuk responded: "Under the law prosecutors take their decisions independently." He refused to discuss Filatov's case further without permission from the District Prosecutor and put the phone down.

Filatov told Forum 18 on 2 March that he was expecting to be jailed. "Given the situation, I fear it will be a real jail term," he told Forum 18. "I'm outraged, because it is unjustifiable to jail someone for seven years for reading the Bible. What am I guilty of?"

"I know for sure that I did not commit any crime, either against God, or before Caesar – that is, before the state", Filatov said in his final statement to the court on 28 February. "I am judged because I am a Christian and consider my faith to be true".

"The prosecution claims that .. I conducted a service in my house, namely, I sang songs of praise to God, said a prayer, [and] read and discussed the Book of the Prophet Daniel, as well as scriptural publications and videos. And this is my 'extremism'! And this despite the fact that not one of the songs, not one of the videos, and even less so the Book of the Prophet Daniel, is banned in Russia!"

"This [legal] process .. makes it completely impossible to understand how, from the point of view of the prosecutor's office, I should behave as a law-abiding citizen professing the Jehovah's Witness religion, in order .. to satisfy my spiritual needs and realise my inalienable fundamental rights to freedom of conscience and religion". Closed hearings on 25 and 28 February heard the final speeches in the case.

The Crimean Prosecutor's Office has not replied to Forum 18's 3 March questions asking why prosecutors had requested a jail sentence, who had been harmed by Filatov's actions, and why meetings for prayer and Bible reading were considered a criminal offence. Forum 18 also pointed out that the Russian Supreme Court had outlawed Jehovah's Witness organisations, but not their beliefs.

"List of Terrorists and Extremists"

Filatov and Gerasimov are – like Crimean Jehovah's Witness facing criminal prosecution Viktor Stashevsky (see below) and Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov – on the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions.

Filatov told Forum 18 that as he does not have a bank account the authorities could not freeze it.

Dzhankoi raids, prosecution

In November 2018, about 10 groups of Russian FSB officers, OMON riot police, and possibly officers of other agencies who had come from Simferopol raided the homes in Dzhankoi of eight families (including that of Filatov) who were members of the two local Jehovah's Witness communities before they were banned in 2017. Officers used violence against some of them, while a pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage following the raids.

The Russian FSB security service accused Filatov of "continuing the activity" of the local Jehovah's Witness community, which had been liquidated as "extremist". Filatov rejects the accusation against him. He told the Investigator that believers met together not as an organisation but as private individuals under the guarantees enshrined in the Russian Constitution. The criminal case reached court in September 2019.

Yalta Jehovah's Witness Artyom Gerasimov fined

On 5 March, Judge Vladimir Romanenko of Yalta City Court convicted another Crimean Jehovah's Witness, Artyom Vyacheslavovich Gerasimov (born 13 January 1985), on "extremism"-related criminal charges, "merely for meeting with others to discuss the Bible", Jehovah's Witness spokesperson Jarrod Lopes told Forum 18 on 5 March.

The prosecutor had asked for a jail term of six and a half years, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a three-year ban on unspecified activities. Judge Romanenko fined Gerasimov 400,000 Roubles, the minimum fine under Criminal Code Article 282.2 Part 1 equivalent to two years average wages. No other punishment appears to have been imposed. Gerasimov intends to challenge his conviction, Jehovah's Witnesses say.

In court, Gerasimov insisted on his innocence, arguing that he had not been involved in any activities of the local Jehovah's Witness organisation after its liquidation in 2017.

He noted in his final statement to the court on 3 March that one investigator "repeatedly stated that in Russia there is not a single prohibited religion, but at the same time he considers my conversation about the Bible in the park to be illegal". "Therefore", Gerasimov continued, "the investigation allows only the first part of Article 28 [of the Russian Constitution] to be used, which states that I have the right to choose and have a faith, but prohibits the use of the second part .. to profess and act in accordance with my convictions."

"It's the same as giving a car to a person who does not have a driver's license. There is a car, but no right to use it", Gerasimov commented. "The religion of Jehovah's Witnesses is not prohibited, but there is no right to profess it!"

"I have no feelings of guilt", he concluded. "My conscience is clear both before God and before the state".

The Crimean Prosecutor's Office has not replied to Forum 18's 4 March questions asking why prosecutors had requested a jail sentence, who had been harmed by Gerasimov's actions, and why meetings for prayer and Bible reading were considered a criminal offence. Forum 18 also pointed out that the Russian Supreme Court had outlawed Jehovah's Witness organisations, but not their beliefs.

Yalta raids, prosecutions

In March 2019, Russian FSB investigators launched a criminal case against Gerasimov and Taras Grigoryevich Kuzio (see below) from the southern Crimean town of Yalta. Five days later, officers raided eight Jehovah's Witness family homes (including that of Gerasimov) in and around Yalta. Officers seized religious literature, money and other documents, and took several people for interrogation. Both Gerasimov and Kuzio had to sign a pledge not to leave the area. The criminal case reached court in September 2019.

February raid on Jehovah's Witness, one of two more facing prosecution

After a 13 February raid on the Yalta home of Jehovah's Witness Taras Grigoryevich Kuzio, and a 4 June 2019 raid on the Sevastapol home of Viktor Vladimirovich Stashevsky, both now face criminal prosecutions as Jehovah's Witnesses. An FSB security service official present during the February 2020 raid put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked why the raid had been launched.

Russia's "extremist" organisation bans applied in Crimea

Russia's Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" in 2017. Prosecutors in Russia were in January 2020 investigating more than 300 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses individuals on "extremism"-related criminal charges, of which 24 were in pre-trial detention.

Following Russia's March 2014 occupation of Crimea, the Russian authorities granted re-registration to all 22 Jehovah's Witness communities in Crimea, but in 2017 they were banned following the Russian Supreme Court ban.

Russia's Supreme Court banned the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat as "extremist" in 2009. The Russian ban was imposed in Crimea after Russia unilaterally occupied and annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014.

In January 2019, a Simferopol court jailed Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov Suleimanov for four years on "extremism"-related charges for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith. The charges related to membership of the banned in Russia Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat.

In May 2019, the Russian authorities transferred Suleimanov from occupied Crimea to a labour camp in Russia. He arrived in Kamenka Labour Camp in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Region in June 2019 and was in July put into a punishment cell for an alleged conflict with another prisoner while being transferred from Crimea to the camp.

In early January 2020, Suleimanov was freed from the camp punishment cell after six months and placed him in the strict section of the camp. Suleimanov's lawyer insists the accusation of conflict with another prisoner was fabricated as an excuse to punish his client again.

CRIMEA: Six months in Russian prison punishment cell

By Felix Corley

From 18 (02.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38oz304> - In January, Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov completed six months in Russian labour camp punishment cell for an alleged conflict with another prisoner. He was then transferred to the camp's

strict section. Suleimanov's lawyer insists the accusation was fabricated to punish his client. On 3 and 5 March, verdicts are expected in criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses Artyom Gerasimov and Sergei Filatov.

In early January, the Russian labour camp which is holding Crimean Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov freed him from the camp punishment cell after six months and placed him in the strict section of the camp. The camp administration claims he was punished for an alleged conflict with another prisoner while being transferred from Crimea to the camp in June 2019. Suleimanov's lawyer insists the accusation was fabricated as an excuse to punish his client.

Kamenka Labour Camp's administration in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Region again refused to explain why Suleimanov had been put in punishment cell for six months and why he is now being held in the strict block. "The law doesn't allow us to give this information," the official told Forum 18 (see below).

In January 2019 a Simferopol court jailed Suleimanov for four years on "extremism"-related charges for meeting openly in mosques with three friends to discuss their faith. The charges related to membership of the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat, which Russia has banned (see below).

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

On the afternoon of 3 March 2020, a court in the southern Crimean town of Yalta is expected to issue its verdict in the "extremism"-related criminal case of Jehovah's Witness Artyom Gerasimov. The prosecutor has demanded a general regime jail term of six and a half years, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a three-year ban on unspecified activity (see below).

On the morning of 5 March, the District Court in the northern Crimean town of Dzhankoi is expected to issue its verdict in the "extremism"-related criminal case of another Crimean Jehovah's Witness, Sergei Filatov. Closed hearings on 25 and 28 February heard the final speeches in the case. The prosecutor has demanded a strict regime jail term of seven years (see below).

If either Gerasimov or Filatov is convicted, they would be the first Jehovah's Witnesses convicted in Russian-occupied Crimea to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief (see below).

Two other Jehovah's Witnesses in Russian-occupied Crimea face "extremism"-related criminal charges. Russian security forces again raided the home of one of them on 13 February. An FSB security service present during the raid put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked why it had been launched (see below).

Meanwhile, the FSB security service Investigator has three times refused to grant permission for Oleg Prikhodko to receive a pastoral visit in Simferopol Investigation Prison from Archbishop Kliment, of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The Investigator initially refused because the Church does not have Russian registration. His third refusal claimed such a pastoral visit might harm the investigation (see below).

"Extremist" organisations banned

Russia's Supreme Court banned the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat as "extremist" in 2009. The Russian ban was imposed in Crimea after Russia annexed the peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014.

Russia's Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist" in 2017. Prosecutors in Russia were in January 2020 investigating more than 300 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses individuals on "extremism"-related criminal charges, of which 24 were in pre-trial detention.

Following Russia's March 2014 occupation of Crimea, the Russian authorities granted re-registration to all 22 Jehovah's Witness communities in Crimea. But in 2017 they were banned following the Russian Supreme Court ban.

Suleimanov: Illegal transfer to Russian prison

Renat Rustemovich Suleimanov (born 30 August 1969), a Crimean Tatar, was born in exile in Kazakhstan's then capital Almaty. When the Crimean Tatars were allowed to return to Crimea, he settled in the village of Molodezhnoe just north of Crimea's capital Simferopol. He is married with three young daughters.

Suleimanov and three friends met openly in mosques to discuss their faith. "At lessons we studied ayats [verses] from the Koran, the value of praying the namaz, and the zikr [reciting devotional phrases as a reminder of Allah]," one of the men told the court at their trial. "These lessons were not conspiratorial and took place in mosques."

After Suleimanov spent more than 15 months in pre-trial detention following his October 2017 arrest by the Russian FSB security service, the Crimean Supreme Court jailed him for four years in January 2019. He was punished on "extremism"-related charges for alleged Tabligh Jamaat membership.

Three others on trial with Suleimanov were given two and a half year suspended sentences, when they will live under restrictions.

In May 2019, the Russian authorities transferred Suleimanov from occupied Crimea to a labour camp in Russia. He arrived in Kamenka Labour Camp in Russia's Kabardino-Balkariya Region in June 2019 and was in July put into a punishment cell.

The Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War covers the rights of civilians in territories occupied by another state (described as "protected persons"). Article 76 includes the provision: "Protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied country, and if convicted they shall serve their sentences therein."

One of Suleimanov's two cases to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg is over his illegal transfer from Ukraine (occupied Crimea) to Russia (see below).

Suleimanov: Six months in prison punishment cell

In early January 2020, Kamenka Labour Camp's administration released Suleimanov from the punishment cell, where he had spent six months, his lawyer Roman Martynovskyy told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kiev. The Labour Camp's administration then transferred Suleimanov to the strict section of the camp.

Prisoners in the strict section have greater restrictions on their movement within the camp, including needing permission to visit other sections of the camp, and are allowed fewer parcels and visits from outside the prison.

Kamenka Labour Camp's administration sent Suleimanov to the punishment cell in early

July 2019 to punish him for allegedly getting into a conflict with another prisoner during his transfer from Crimea to prison in Russia. "It is not true," Martynovskyy insisted to Forum 18. "This was fabricated by the convoy guards."

The Special Department of the Labour Camp's administration again refused to explain why Suleimanov had been put in punishment cell for six months and why he is being held in the strict section of the camp. "The law doesn't allow us to give this information," the official repeatedly told Forum 18 on 20 February, before putting the phone down.

Forum 18 was therefore unable to find out whether Suleimanov has access to the Koran and other religious literature, and whether he can pray unimpeded.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules – A/C.3/70/L.3) requires governments to respect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners. This includes access to religious texts and the freedom to pray individually and to meet for worship with others.

Suleimanov's labour camp address is:

361424 Kabardino-Balkariya
Chegemsky raion
Pos. Kamenka
Ul. D.A. Mizieva 1
Ispravitel'naya Koloniya No. 1
Suleimanovu Renatu Rustemovichu

Suleimanov: European Court of Human Rights cases

Prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov has lodged two cases against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in Strasbourg, the Court told Forum 18.

Suleimanov lodged the first case on 16 October 2019 (Application No. 56354/19). He argues that the Russian authorities violated his rights under Article 6 ("Right to a fair trial"), Article 7 ("No punishment without law"), Article 9 ("Freedom of thought, conscience and religion"), Article 10 ("Freedom of expression"), Article 11 ("Freedom of assembly and association") and Article 13 ("Right to an effective remedy") of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Suleimanov lodged the second case on 18 November 2019 (Application No. 64404/19), complaining that his transfer from Ukraine (occupied Crimea) to a prison in Russia was illegal under Article 3 Protocol 4 of the Convention and of inhumane treatment in prison (Article 3).

Two Jehovah's Witness verdicts imminent

On the afternoon of 3 March, Judge Vladimir Romanenko at Yalta City Court is expected to issue his verdict in the "extremism"-related criminal case of Jehovah's Witness Artyom Vyacheslavovich Gerasimov (born 13 January 1985), according to court records. The prosecutor has demanded a jail term of six and a half years, plus one year of restrictions on freedom and a three-year ban on unspecified activity.

On the morning of 5 March, Judge Mariya Yermakova at Dzhankoi District Court is expected to issue her verdict in the "extremism"-related criminal case of another Crimean Jehovah's Witness Sergei Viktorovich Filatov (born 6 June 1972), according to court records. Closed hearings on 25 and 28 February heard the final speeches in the case. The prosecutor has demanded a strict regime jail term of seven years.

If either Gerasimov or Filatov is convicted, they would be the first Jehovah's Witnesses convicted in Russian-occupied Crimea to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Both Gerasimov and Filatov are on trial under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. In both cases the Russian FSB security service initiated the criminal cases. Neither was held in pre-trial detention, but both were under travel restrictions, having to sign pledges not to leave the area as the cases were being investigated and once the trials began.

Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 punishes "Organisation of" and Part 2 punishes "participation in" "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity". The maximum punishment under Part 1 of this Article is 10 years' imprisonment.

In March 2019, Russian FSB investigators launched a criminal case against Gerasimov and Taras Grigoryevich Kuzio (see below) from the southern Crimean town of Yalta. Five days later, officers raided eight Jehovah's Witness family homes (including that of Gerasimov) in and around Yalta. Officers seized religious literature, money and other documents, and took several people for interrogation. Both Gerasimov and Kuzio had to sign a pledge not to leave the area. The criminal case reached court in September 2019.

In November 2018, about 10 groups of Russian FSB officers, OMON riot police, and possibly officers of other agencies who had come from Simferopol raided the homes in Dzhankoi of eight families (including that of Filatov) who were members of the two local Jehovah's Witness communities before they were banned in 2017. Officers used violence against some of them, while a pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage following the raids.

The Russian FSB security service accused Filatov of "continuing the activity" of the local Jehovah's Witness community, which had been liquidated as "extremist". Filatov rejects the accusation against him. He told the Investigator that believers meet together not as an organisation but as private individuals under the guarantees enshrined in the Russian Constitution. The criminal case reached court in September 2019.

New raid on Jehovah's Witness, one of two more facing prosecution

On 13 February 2020, Russian security forces raided the home in the southern Crimean town of Yalta of Jehovah's Witness Taras Grigoryevich Kuzio (born 19 June 1978). Officers intended to use a grinding machine to break into his home, but he reached the door to let them in before they could force entry, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

Officers – who were led by Lieutenant S. Gainiev of the Russian FSB security service's Crimean branch, and accompanied by local officer Senior Lieutenant P. Shurupov – read out a court order authorising a house search. However, they refused to give Kuzio a copy. Officers seized electronic devices and personal notes.

Asked by Forum 18 on 2 March why he and other FSB officers raided Kuzio's home, Senior Lieutenant Shurupov put the phone down.

Officers had earlier tried and failed to find any banned materials in Kuzio's home.

Viktor Vladimirovich Stashevsky (born 11 July 1966), a resident of the port city of Sevastopol, is also facing criminal prosecution as a Jehovah's Witness. On 4 June 2019,

Russian FSB investigators launched a criminal case against him. That evening, FSB officers raided at least nine local homes, with a further follow-up raid on 7 July 2019. He had to sign a pledge not to leave the area.

The Russian FSB Investigator handling Stashevsky's case - Lieutenant Aleksandr Chumakin (who was also the initial FSB investigator on Filatov's case) - did not answer his phone on 28 February.

Jehovah's Witnesses Filatov, Gerasimov, and Stashevsky, as well as Muslim prisoner of conscience Renat Suleimanov, are on the Russian Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists", whose accounts banks are obliged to freeze, apart from small transactions.

Prikhodko: Denied prison visit from priest of his choice

Oleg Prikhodko is a 61-year-old from Saki on Crimea's western coast, accused of preparing acts of terrorism, charges he denies. He has been held since October 2019 in pre-trial detention at Simferopol's Investigation Prison No. 1.

The Russian FSB security service, which is investigating Prikhodko's case, has three times refused his application for a prison visit from Archbishop Kliment (Kushch) of Simferopol and Crimea. "The most recent denial of permission came in late January 2020," Prikhodko's lawyer Nazim Sheikmambetov told Forum 18 on 20 February.

"Oleg is a member of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and wants to conduct religious rites with Archbishop Kliment," Sheikmambetov added. "He said that on religious grounds he is not prepared to accept other priests."

However, the Russian FSB Investigator's response claimed that Prikhodko could not meet third parties because it might harm the continuing investigation, Sheikmambetov told Forum 18.

Prikhodko asked twice in 2019 for Archbishop Kliment to be allowed to make a pastoral visit, but these requests were both denied, Radio Free Europe's Crimean Realities noted on 30 December 2019.

"In his earlier refusal, the Investigator had claimed that the religious organisation Kliment represents is not registered," Prikhodko's lawyer Sheikmambetov told Forum 18 on 20 February 2020.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine does not have registration in Crimea under Russian law. It initially decided it would not seek registration under Russian law in occupied Crimea. In March 2019 it tried to register its Simferopol parish as an independent community. The Crimean Justice Ministry issued three successive refusals to register the community in 2019. This means that the Russian authorities do not recognise the community as legally existing.

"Access to a qualified representative of any religion shall not be refused to any prisoner," declares Rule 65 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules - A/C.3/70/L.3), which require governments to respect the freedom of religion and belief and other human rights of prisoners.

The Special Department of Simferopol's Investigation Prison No. 1 insisted to Forum 18 on 28 February that "we don't decide, it is the FSB". The official - who did not give her name - added that the prison has a priest, "but he didn't ask for him". Told that the

prison has a responsibility to ensure access by a representative of the religion that the prisoner chooses, she put the phone down. (END)

CRIMEA: 35 "anti-missionary" prosecutions in 2019

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (19.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TGYvIS> - Prosecutions in Russian-occupied Crimea for ill-defined "missionary activity" in 2019 were at the same rate as in 2018. Of 24 prosecutions in 2019 for sharing faith or holding worship at unapproved venues, 17 ended in punishment (fines of five days' average wages). Also, 11 communities were prosecuted for not using their full legal name outside their meeting place or in religious literature.

In Russian-occupied Crimea in 2019 there were 24 prosecutions brought against 23 individuals and 1 community for ill-defined "missionary activity", of which 17 ended with punishment, Forum 18 has found. Many of those punished were prosecuted for holding worship at unapproved venues or for sharing their faith on the street. Further cases continue in early 2020.

This represents little change in the number of such cases in the Crimean peninsula, with 23 prosecutions in 2018 of which 19 ended in punishment. The first year such punishments for "missionary activity" were imposed - July 2016 to July 2017 - saw 13 known cases of which 8 ended in punishment.

"These punishments do have an impact," one member of a religious community in Crimea who was earlier fined for sharing their faith on the street told Forum 18 in January 2019. "Believers go out to share their faith less often, and give out publications or invitations less openly. It is a question not just of fines – if you don't pay then fines are doubled, then if you still don't pay they impose compulsory labour."

Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea is not recognised by Ukraine or internationally.

All 17 of the people punished in Crimea in 2019 – all Russian citizens – were fined about 5 days' average local wages each (Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 - "Russians conducting missionary activity").

No foreign citizens are known to have faced prosecution in Russian-occupied Crimea in 2019 under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 - "Foreigners conducting missionary activity". In 2018, seven people – all longtime residents who are Ukrainian citizens - were punished for participating in religious meetings of a community they belonged to.

There were also 11 cases brought in Crimea in 2019 against 10 religious communities and 1 individual to punish them for failing to use the full legal name of a registered religious community (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").

Four of these 11 cases ended with fines of 30,000 Russian Roubles (one month's average

local wages) each, and 2 defendants received a warning. The other 5 cases ended with no punishment. The communities known to have faced administrative cases are: 5 Protestant, 1 Muslim, 1 Messianic Jewish, 1 Seventh-day Adventist, 1 Hare Krishna and 1 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This represents little change in the number of such cases against religious communities in Crimea under Article 5.26, Part 3, with 12 cases against religious communities in 2018. In the first year of the imposition of such punishments – between July 2016 and July 2017 – Forum 18 found 14 such administrative cases, of which 8 ended in punishment.

A full listing of known 2019 cases in the administratively separate Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol - based on court decisions and court records seen by Forum 18 - is at the foot of this article.

Administrative prosecutions are also brought against those who have or are deemed to be in charge of religious literature the Russian authorities consider "extremist" or who hold unapproved public exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief (see below).

Penalties for ill-defined "anti-missionary" activity

The 35 Russian Administrative Code cases in Crimea in 2019 were all brought under wide-ranging and ill-defined "anti-missionary" Russian legal changes made in July 2016. The Russian authorities immediately imposed these punishments in Crimea, which they occupied in March 2014.

Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 3 punishes the "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". This incurs a fine of 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles and the confiscation of any literature or other material.

In upholding a Russian Pentecostal Pastor's appeal in November 2017, Russia's Supreme Court declared that Article 5.26, Part 3 does not apply to private individuals or people employed in an official capacity, only to legal entities. This may account for why the only case under this Part against an individual in Crimea in 2019 was returned (see list below).

Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 punishes "Russians conducting missionary activity". This incurs a fine of 5,000 to 50,000 Roubles. For organisations (legal entities), the fine is 100,000 to 1 million Roubles. Unregistered religious groups must notify the authorities of their existence, activities and membership but are not legal entities. Their members are therefore subject to prosecution as individuals.

Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 punishes "Foreigners conducting missionary activity". This incurs a fine of 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles with the possibility of expulsion from Russia.

Human rights defender Aleksandr Sedov of the Crimean Human Rights Group stated in 2017 that the punishments violate the rights to freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. He also pointed out that they also break the Geneva Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, which enshrines the rights of civilians in occupied territories.

Tight Russian freedom of religion and belief restrictions

Since the March 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, local religious communities which wanted to continue to function had to re-register under Russian law. Many were forced to restructure themselves to meet Russian requirements. This usually entailed cutting ties to their fellow-believers elsewhere in Ukraine.

Individuals and religious communities in Crimea were also subjected to the web of restrictions on exercising freedom of religion or belief enshrined in Russian law. They have faced raids, fines, religious literature seizures, government surveillance, expulsions of invited foreign religious leaders, unilateral cancellation of property rental contracts and obstructions to regaining places of worship confiscated in the Soviet period.

Prosecutions continue in 2020

Following a raid by Russian security forces on Friday prayers at a Simferopol mosque, Prosecutors brought a case against the Imam, Rasim Dervishev, under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity").

On 14 January 2020, Prosecutors handed the case against Imam Dervishev to Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 13. His lawyer, Ayder Azamatov, argued in court that the Imam should not be punished for leading Friday prayers. The case is due to resume on 25 February (see forthcoming F18News article).

Among other 2020 cases is one brought against Simferopol's Vineyard Pentecostal Church under 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").

Prosecutions for "extremist" religious literature, public religious events

Individuals are also fined for having or being deemed to be in charge of religious literature the Russian authorities consider "extremist".

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, religious communities, libraries and individuals have repeatedly faced raids and punishment over religious literature which is banned as "extremist" but which does not appear to violate the human rights of others.

Officers – often armed – have raided numerous madrassahs (Muslim colleges), libraries, Muslim-owned homes and Jehovah's Witness meetings seizing such literature. Individuals have been punished under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.29 ("Production or mass distribution of extremist materials included in the published Federal List of Extremist Materials, as well as their production or storage for mass distribution").

Prosecutions are also brought in Crimea to punish exercise of freedom of religion or belief in public under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket"), which is linked to the Demonstrations Law.

Prosecutors brought three separate cases against Sevastopol Hare Krishna devotee Aleksandr Kramarenko under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2 to punish him for singing mantras on the street with fellow devotees in December 2019. However, on 4 February 2020, Sevastopol's Lenin District Court sent the cases back because the records of an offence had not been correctly prepared, according to court records.

Kramarenko was among those fined in 2019 under Russia's "anti-missionary" laws (see list below).

Criminal cases also underway

In addition to these Russian Administrative Code cases, two individuals are known to be on trial to punish their exercise of freedom of religion or belief, with others also facing criminal prosecution.

On 20 February, Yalta City Court is expected to issue its verdict in the "extremism"-related criminal case of Jehovah's Witness Artyom Gerasimov. The prosecutor has demanded a jail term of six and a half years, plus one year of restricted freedom and a three-year ban on unspecified activity.

On 25 February, Dzhankoi District Court is due to hear the final speeches in the "extremism"-related criminal case of another Jehovah's Witness Sergei Filatov.

About 10 groups of FSB officers, OMON riot police and possibly officers of other agencies who had come from Simferopol then raided the homes in Dzhankoi of eight families (including that of Filatov) who were members of the two local Jehovah's Witness communities before they were banned in 2017. Violence was used against some of them, while a pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage following the raids.

Both Gerasimov and Filatov are on trial under Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1.

Russian Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1 punishes "Organisation of" and Part 2 punishes "participation in" "the activity of a social or religious association or other organisation in relation to which a court has adopted a decision legally in force on liquidation or ban on the activity in connection with the carrying out of extremist activity".

After more than 15 months in pre-trial detention following his October 2017 arrest by the Russian FSB security service, the Crimean Supreme Court jailed local Muslim Renat Suleimanov for four years. He was punished on "extremism"-related charges for alleged Tabligh Jamaat membership. He is serving his sentence in a labour camp in Russia, where he has spent months in a prison punishment cell. Three others on trial with him were given two and a half year suspended sentences, when they will live under restrictions.

Known Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26 cases in Crimea in 2019

The list of known 2019 prosecutions under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Parts 3 and 4, based on court records and other information (date of court hearing, name of individual/community, punishment, court, material on which prosecution based, appeal):

- 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")

1) 15 February 2019

Name: Sevastopol Hare Krishna community

Punishment: none

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 10

Circumstances: Interior Ministry Centre for Countering Extremism accused community of

meeting in premises without displaying sign with full community name. Acquitted
Appeal: none

2) 14 March 2019

Name: Ark of Salvation Protestant Church, Kerch

Punishment: none

Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 44

Circumstances: Case returned 14 March 2019 (returned earlier on 13 February 2019)

Appeal: none

3) 21 March 2019

Name: I. Tkach

Punishment: none

Court: Saki Magistrate's Court No. 71

Circumstances: Unknown circumstances. Returned

Appeal: none

4) 1 April 2019

Name: Inkerman Missionary Church

Punishment: 30,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Balaklava Magistrate's Court No. 2

Circumstances: Held worship meeting with no sign giving full legal name

Appeal: none

5) 1 April 2019

Name: Inkerman Baptist Church

Punishment: none

Court: Balaklava Magistrate's Court No. 2

Circumstances: Interior Ministry Centre for Countering Extremism checked all its religious literature and found works which had not been marked with the community's full legal name. Acquitted, as literature used only within premises

Appeal: none

6) 22 April 2019

Name: Havah Nagilah (Let Us Rejoice) Messianic Jewish community

Punishment: 30,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 16

Circumstances: Prosecutor's Office inspection during worship on Saturday 16 March 2019 found no sign giving full legal name

Appeal: none

7) 4 July 2019

Name: Razdolnoe Pentecostal Centre

Punishment: Official warning

Court: Razdolnoe Magistrate's Court No. 69

Circumstances: Prosecutor's Office inspected Church during worship on Sunday 30 June 2019. Church failed to display sign with full legal name

Appeal: none

8) 9 July 2019

Name: Khak Yol (Right Path) Muslim community, Verkhnyaya Kutuzovka

Punishment: Official warning

Court: Alushta Magistrate's Court No. 23

Circumstances: FSB instructed Prosecutor's Office to inspect community. Found lessons on Koran and Arabic taking place in yard of home without notice with full legal name of community. Transferred from Court No. 22 on 3 June 2019

Appeal: none

9) 12 July 2019

Name: Seventh-day Adventist Church

Punishment: none

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 13

Circumstances: Case halted

Appeal: none

10) 1 November 2019

Name: Sevastopol Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Punishment: 30,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 12

Circumstances: Prosecutor's Office inspection found religious literature and other materials which had not been marked with the community's full legal name

Appeal: Lodged at Sevastopol's Lenin District Court 17 January 2020; hearing due 4 March 2020

11) 13 November 2019

Name: God's Horizon Protestant Church, Sevastopol

Punishment: 30,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 13

Circumstances: Maintained pages on VKontakte and Facebook not showing full name of Church

Appeal: none

- Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity")

1) 10 January 2019

Name: Vasily Olovyanishnikov

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 51

Circumstances: Leading Sunday worship of Pentecostal group in home after FSB requested investigation from Prosecutor's Office

Appeal: none

2) 16 January 2019

Name: Igor Ratnikov

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 12

Circumstances: Head of Messianic Jewish community led worship. Case documents included 3 witness statements and interrogation records of 31 individuals

Appeal: none

3) 18 January 2019

Name: Stanislav Negrulya

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 10

Circumstances: At least 2 people present at religious meeting of unknown affiliation were not members of the community

Appeal: none

4) 30 January 2019

Name: Andrei Tereshchenko

Punishment: none

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 75
Circumstances: Hare Krishna devotee who had gathered for religious meeting with others in home visited by prosecutor's office officials in inspection. Acquitted, as prosecutor did not specify or prove in what way he had committed an "offence"
Appeal: none

5) 22 February 2019

Name: Sofiya Yanovskaya
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 2
Circumstances: Offered Falun Gong literature in park to passers-by
Appeal: unsuccessful – 8 April 2019, Railway District Court, Simferopol; supervisory, unsuccessful – 20 June 2019, Crimean Supreme Court

6) 11 March 2019

Name: Natalya Ramaerisun
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 44
Circumstances: Prosecutor's Office inspected Ark of Salvation Protestant Church, Kerch, during Sunday evening service 20 January 2019. Ramaerisun was conducting children's religious lessons.
Appeal: none

7) 11 March 2019

Name: Natalya Kuznetsova
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 44
Circumstances: Prosecutor's Office inspected Ark of Salvation Protestant Church, Kerch, during Sunday evening service 20 January 2019. Kuznetsova was conducting children's religious lessons.
Appeal: none

8) 25 March 2019

Name: Yuliya Shilyayeva
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 6
Circumstances: Published on social media materials about Tree of Life Pentecostal Church designed to attract new members
Appeal: none

9) 25 April 2019

Name: Abdulla Gemedzhi
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 5
Circumstances: Led Friday prayers on 25 January 2019 in independent mosque claimed by the Crimean Muftiate ("conducted missionary activity in the form of a worship service"), where he has led prayers since 1995
Appeal: none

10) 30 April 2019

Name: Abdulla Gemedzhi
Punishment: none
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 5
Circumstances: Led Friday prayers on 18 January 2019 in independent mosque. Case closed because it had passed deadline for consideration
Appeal: none

11) 26 April 2019

Name: Tatyana Pshenichnaya

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 47

Circumstances: FSB took books and leaflets of unknown international religious group from pensioner's presentation in library (transferred from Court No. 48)

Appeal: unsuccessful – 24 May 2019, Kerch City Court; rejected without consideration – 10 and 11 June 2019, Crimean Supreme Court

12) 30 April 2019

Name: Abdulla Gemedzhi

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 5

Circumstances: Led Friday prayers on 1 February 2019 in independent mosque.

Appeal: none

13) 14 May 2019

Name: A. Nechiporuk (female)

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 6

Circumstances: Police Centre for Countering Extremism found her giving out leaflets with contact details for Sevastopol Christian Centre from Kemerovo

Appeal: none

14) 14 May 2019

Name: K. Nechiporuk (male)

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 6

Circumstances: Police Centre for Countering Extremism found him giving out leaflets with contact details for Sevastopol Christian Centre from Kemerovo

Appeal: none

15) 14 May 2019

Name: N. Yevdokimova

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 6

Circumstances: Police Centre for Countering Extremism found her giving out leaflets with contact details for Sevastopol Christian Centre from Kemerovo

Appeal: none

16) 4 July 2019

Name: Seventh-day Adventist Church

Punishment: none

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 13

Circumstances: Case halted (transferred from Simferopol's Kiev District Court 4 June 2019)

Appeal: none

17) 16 July 2019

Name: Anastasiya Ivasyuk

Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles

Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 16

Circumstances: Distributed Hare Krishna literature without full name of religious organisation and answered questions on the faith from passers-by

Appeal: none

18) 6 August 2019
Name: Aleksei Sonin
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 14
Circumstances: Hare Krishna devotee, sang mantras in park
Appeal: rejected without consideration – 15 October 2019, Sevastopol City Court

19) 12 August 2019
Name: Aleksandr Kramarenko
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Sevastopol Magistrate's Court No. 14
Circumstances: Hare Krishna devotee, sang mantras in park
Appeal: none

20) 10 September 2019
Name: I. Kristya
Punishment: none
Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 48
Circumstances: Case sent back
Appeal: none

21) 10 September 2019
Name: A. Saulidi
Punishment: none
Court: Kerch Magistrate's Court No. 48
Circumstances: Case sent back
Appeal: none

22) 30 September 2019
Name: Arsen Kantemirov
Punishment: none
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 75
Circumstances: Imam of Salgir Baba Mosque in Zarechnoe, raided during Friday prayers by Russian security forces. Case dismissed because too much time had elapsed (earlier returned on 28 August 2019)
Appeal: none

23) 8 November 2019
Name: Aydar Islyamov
Punishment: 5,000 Russian Roubles
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 76
Circumstances: Leading Friday prayers in a home in Ukrainka raided by armed Russian security personnel
Appeal: none

24) 16 December 2019
Name: Asan Bekirov
Punishment: none
Court: Simferopol Magistrate's Court No. 75
Circumstances: Led prayers at Salgir Baba Mosque in Zarechnoe raided during Friday prayers by Russian security forces. Case dismissed because too much time had elapsed (Case earlier returned on 12 November 2019)
Appeal: Simferopol District Court sent back Prosecutor's challenge without consideration, 24 January 2020

DONBAS: Donetsk: Raid, fine for unregistered worship meetings

Security forces of the unrecognised Donetsk People's Republic raided Protestant Sunday morning worship on 19 January. They interrogated church leaders at the police station. In December 2018, a Makeyevka court fined another Protestant leader 10 days' average local wages for leading a community denied registration. "Each country has its own Religion Law," the rebels' Ombudsperson Darya Morozova claimed, wrongly.

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (10.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bw6BfL> - The authorities of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), an unrecognised entity in eastern Ukraine, continue to punish religious communities which meet for worship without permission. Security forces raided a Protestant community during its Sunday morning worship meeting on 19 January. They took church leaders to the police station for interrogation, but released them after several hours.

After prosecutors found another Protestant community meeting for worship after being denied registration, they arranged for a court in Makeyevka to fine the leader ten days' average local wages in December 2019 (see below).

Despite October 2019 amendments to the DPR Religion Law reducing to 10 the number of adult local residents required to form a local religious organisation, almost all non-Moscow Patriarchate religious communities are still being denied registration. Jehovah's Witnesses were banned entirely in September 2018 (see below).

Sergei Gavrish, the head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, refused to give Forum 18 any information about which religious communities had been granted registration, or which had been refused and why (see below).

In autumn 2019, Fr Aleksandr Sushko, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, temporarily travelled out of the rebel-held area into government-controlled Ukraine. However, when he sought re-entry to rebel-held Donetsk, its officials barred him entry. They refused to put the ban in writing (see below).

The rebel authorities have seized numerous places of worship of a variety of faiths. They seized two churches in Donetsk from the Ukrainian Orthodox Kiev Patriarchate (now the Orthodox Church of Ukraine) in 2018. In January 2019, they formally opened a Registry Office in the seized building of New Life Baptist Church in Makeyevka, attended by the first Deputy Justice Minister. The Justice Ministry refused to put Forum 18 through to ask the Deputy Minister why (see below).

Asked about all these specific violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, the rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova told Forum 18 from Donetsk that her office had received no appeals about any such violations in 2019 or 2020. "To take any action I need a written appeal from an individual or community," she insisted (see below).

Asked why religious communities which meet for worship without registration should be punished, Morozova insisted that everyone must follow the law. "Each country has its own Religion Law," she claimed, wrongly (see below).

Pro-Russian rebels 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.

Restrictive law, de facto and actual bans

The unrecognised DPR's People's Council adopted a Religion Law on 24 June 2016. Article 3 included a ban on "the creation of sects or the spreading of sectarianism", concepts that the Law did not define. The Preamble to the Law also banned "sectarianism".

The Law did not explicitly ban exercising freedom of religion or belief without official permission. However, in outlining procedures for gaining state permission it presumed that such permission was required.

On 13 April 2018, the People's Council adopted an amendment to the Religion Law requiring all non-Moscow Patriarchate organisations to re-register by 1 March 2019. The amendment specifically banned religious organisations from functioning if they failed to get re-registration by the deadline.

Registration was supposed to be enacted by the Justice Ministry on the recommendation of the Religion and Nationalities Department of the Culture Ministry. The Justice Ministry's State Registration Department issued its first certificate to a religious organisation – a Jewish community – on 26 March 2019. Signing the certificate was acting Department Head Sergei Goptsy (now the Deputy Head).

However, most non-Moscow Patriarchate communities (including all Protestant communities) were initially rejected. Only in late 2019 did a few more get registration.

On 11 October 2019, the People's Council adopted a further amendment, removing "sectarianism" from the Preamble. The amendment changed in Article 3 the ban on "the creation of sects or the spreading of sectarianism" to a ban on "the creation of religious associations infringing on the rights and freedoms of citizens".

The October 2019 amendment also reduced in Article 8, Part 3 the number of adults permanently resident in one locality required to form a local religious organisation from 50 to 10. In Article 8, Part 4 and Article 9, Part 2 the amendment reduced the requirement for founding a centralised religious organisation from 10 local communities to three.

Sergei Gavrish, the head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, refused to give Forum 18 any information on how many communities had gained registration. He also refused to explain why almost all non-Moscow Patriarchate communities had been denied registration. "We won't give any information," he told Forum 18 from Donetsk on 20 January 2020.

On 26 September 2018, the Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witnesses entirely. The General Prosecutor's Office website noted the same day that "In future, the carrying out of activity by adherents of the given religious association in any form will attract criminal responsibility".

The ban on Jehovah's Witnesses – which could not be challenged – followed several Supreme Court decisions declaring their literature and international website "extremist". The Supreme Court also banned several Muslim publications as "extremist".

The rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova told Forum 18 on 10 February that Jehovah's Witnesses have not appealed to her office about the ban. "To take any action I need a written appeal from an individual or community."

Raid on meeting for worship

DPR security forces raided a Protestant community during its Sunday morning worship meeting on 19 January 2020, fellow Protestants told Forum 18, asking that the community not be identified. Officers took several church members to the police station, where they interrogated them. They released the church members later in the afternoon. It does not appear that any of them were subjected to court cases.

The rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova told Forum 18 on 10 February that she was unaware of raids on religious communities, including the 19 January raid.

Fine for meeting for worship

On 23 December 2019, the leader of Ark of the Covenant Pentecostal Church in the town of Makeyevka was fined, the DPR General Prosecutor's Office noted on its website the following day.

The latest trouble for the church began in late 2019, when the Prosecutor's Office in Makeyevka inspected the church and found that it was still functioning despite being refused registration by the Culture Ministry. The Ministry claimed that the church had failed to submit all the required documents with its application.

Sergei Gavrish, the head of the Religion and Nationalities Department at the Culture Ministry in Donetsk, refused to tell Forum 18 on 10 February 2020 what documents Ark of the Covenant Church had failed to submit.

The Prosecutor's Office claimed that the Church's decision to continue functioning "without state registration is a violation of Article 11, Part 1 and Article 32, Part 6" of the local Religion Law.

The Prosecutor's Office brought a case against the Church's leader under Article 186-5, Part 1 of the Administrative Code (the DPR uses a modified 2013 version of Ukraine's Soviet-era Administrative Code).

Article 186-5, Part 1 ("Violation of the law on associations") punishes leadership of or participation in associations which have been denied registration or stripped of registration through the courts with small fines.

On 23 December 2019, a judge at Gornyatsky Inter-District Court in Makeyevka found the church leader guilty and fined him 3,400 Russian Roubles (the DPR uses the Russian Rouble), the General Prosecutor's Office noted. This represents about 10 days' average wages for those in formal work.

The Court refused to give Forum 18 any information about the fine by phone on 20 January. Forum 18 received no response from the Court to its written questions by the end of the working day in Donetsk on 10 February.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Makeyevka's Prosecutor, Aleksandr Ryabtsev, or any of his colleagues on 10 February.

The rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova read the General Prosecutor's Office announcement on its website while Forum 18 waited on the phone. "I would need to look at the documents before commenting," she told Forum 18. "I don't want to give a subjective judgment." She insisted that even though Ark of the Covenant Church does not have registration, it can still appeal to her office.

Asked why religious communities which meet for worship without registration should be punished, Morozova insisted that everyone must follow the law. "Each country has its own Religion Law," she claimed, wrongly.

Priest barred from returning

Some religious communities face obstruction in maintaining their clergy in the rebel-held areas of Donetsk Region. Clergy overseeing the communities are also denied entry, cutting such communities off from their fellow-believers and spiritual oversight.

In autumn 2019, Fr Aleksandr Sushko, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, temporarily travelled out of the rebel-held area into government-controlled Ukraine. However, when he sought re-entry to rebel-held Donetsk, its officials barred him entry.

"They gave Fr Aleksandr nothing in writing but told him verbally that he was being deported because he served the Ukrainian Church," his bishop Archbishop Sergei (Gorobtsov) told Forum 18 from Mariupol (in Ukrainian government-controlled territory) on 31 January 2020.

The rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova told Forum 18 on 10 February that Fr Sushko has not appealed to her office for help and that she was unaware of the refusal to allow him to return.

Archbishop Sergei said that only four of his priests now remain in the rebel-held area. "Eighteen priests left during or after the fighting in 2014 – one was even held in custody before being released. Those that remain are under pressure. They fear leaving in case they are not allowed to return."

Archbishop Sergei said that the rebel authorities would not allow him to visit the region. This means he is unable to make pastoral visits to his communities there. "I'm on a list, and they would probably arrest me if I tried to enter," he told Forum 18. "I last tried to get in in 2014. I would only go if they gave me security guarantees."

The rebel authorities allowed the Vatican nuncio Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti to visit Roman and Greek Catholics in Donetsk for a Christmas Mass on the evening of 24 December 2019. The Mass was held at 6 pm because it had to be over before the curfew (currently from 11 pm to 5 am), the Apostolic Nunciature website noted.

Two Orthodox Churches seized

In summer 2018, the rebel authorities seized two churches in Donetsk from the Ukrainian Orthodox Kiev Patriarchate (now the Orthodox Church of Ukraine). They seized Holy Spirit Church and Christ the Saviour Church, Archbishop Sergei (Gorobtsov) told Forum 18 from Mariupol (in Ukrainian government-controlled territory) on 31 January 2020.

"Officials said that they don't have registration and the gas and electricity had already been cut off, as the communities have no registration," Archbishop Sergei told Forum 18.

"Holy Spirit Church has already been handed to the State Property Fund and it's unclear what will happen to it."

Archbishop Sergei said that of the 36 churches in rebel-held territory which have registration under Ukrainian law about half are still operating. "We have only four priests left there, and they travel around to keep services going."

In late 2019, the rebel authorities denied re-entry to another priest who travelled out of rebel-held territory (see above).

Seized places of worship

In the years since the rebels established the DPR, they have seized numerous places of worship, expelled the owners and used the buildings for other purposes.

On 17 January 2019, the rebel authorities formally opened Red Guard District Registry Office in the town of Makeyevka in the seized building of New Life Baptist Church. The Registry Office is run by the Justice Ministry. "I would like to thank the people who put in a lot of effort for this ceremony to take place," Yakov Khodos, first deputy Justice Minister told the gathering, according to the DPR People's Council website.

The office of Justice Minister Yuri Sirovatko refused to put Forum 18 through to Deputy Minister Khodos or give his number on 10 February 2020.

On 6 July 2018, officials seized the two-storey building of New Life Baptist Church. "About midday, seven officials – including some with weapons – arrived and told us that our building no longer belongs to us," Pastor Aleksandr Moseychuk recounted the same day. "Despite all our persuasion and discussions, they sealed the building." The seal on the door was signed by a Justice Ministry official A. S. Bashkatov.

In July 2018, the authorities turned a former place of worship in Donetsk of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) into a Registry Office. All Jehovah's Witness places of worship have been seized and allocated to other uses, as have Donetsk Christian University, Protestant churches and two mosques.

The rebels' Human Rights Ombudsperson Darya Morozova said that she was unaware of the seizure of places of worship, including New Life Baptist Church in Makeyevka. "They can submit an appeal," she told Forum 18 on 10 February. "If there was a violation of the law we will take action."

Baptist Church spared

In May 2019, the DPR authorities tried to seize Light of the Gospel Baptist Church in Donetsk. Church members finished building it in 2010 after ten years of work.

"They threatened to seal the church," local Baptists told Forum 18 in January 2020. "But as there was no court decision they did not seize it. Church members took everything out of the building, including even the radiators. But when it became clear that they were not about to seize it, the church restarted services."

Light of the Gospel Church lodged registration documents, but so far has not received it, local Baptists added.

DONBAS: Luhansk: No gas, electricity, water for unregistered communities

The rebel Luhansk People's Republic – which denies registration to many religious communities including all Protestants – threatens to cut off gas, electricity and water to places of worship belonging to unrecognised communities. The rebel authorities have allowed the only Catholic priest to return to the territory, but have not said if he can remain permanently or only for three months.

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (05.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31SokJN> - In 2019 the rulers of the unrecognised self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine cut off or threatened to cut off gas, electricity and water supplies to religious communities which had a recognised place of worship but which failed to gain registration under LPR laws. Gas supplies were cut off in 2019. In late 2019 the LPR authorities also threatened to cut off electricity and water supplies.

"Officials argue that they cannot supply gas, electricity and water to organisations that don't officially exist, as they can't have contracts with them," Baptist Pastor Serhii Moroz told Forum 18 (see below).

In December 2019 Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Dmitry Sidorov, revealed that of the 195 registered religious organisations, 188 are from the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate. The others are Muslim, Old Believer, Jewish and Catholic. No Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, Hare Krishna or other communities are allowed to get registration (see below).

In December 2019 the LPR authorities allowed the only Roman Catholic priest serving the two local Catholic parishes to return to the region, but without saying if he can remain permanently or if he will have to leave when three months are up (see below).

"This year we lived for a long time with no priest," local Catholics wrote in a Christmas 2019 letter to the Vatican nuncio, who led the Christmas Mass in Luhansk on 25 December. "It was very difficult" (see below).

Fr Grzegorz Rapa is only allowed to stay in LPR-controlled territory for three months at a time, and then must leave for three months. In the three months when Fr Rapa is unable to visit Luhansk, Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass (see below).

Catholic nuns who used to work in the Luhansk parish left amid the conflict in 2014. "The people want them to work there again. We want them to," one Catholic told Forum 18 (see below).

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry's Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department, with whom the Catholics are discussing Fr Rapa's case, refused to explain to Forum 18 why it is obstructing his residence in Luhansk (see below).

The rebel authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers. Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and

many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities isolated from their fellow-believers elsewhere.

In late January 2020, the unrecognised LPR's State Security Ministry threatened Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – with an "extremism" criminal prosecution if he continues to lead Council of Churches Baptist meetings for worship without the permission of the LPR authorities. In November 2019 the rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist".

Prosecutors are also still investigating Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest Fr Anatoli Nazarenko on "extremism" charges.

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), which is internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which in February 2020 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), which is also internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration in February 2020 controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

Registration – only for a few

As of December 2019, the LPR authorities had registered only 195 religious organisations, according to figures given by Dmitry Sidorov, Culture, Sport and Youth Minister, at a 26 December 2019 briefing in the government building in Luhansk.

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not been given permission to exist via registration are illegal. They point to a May 2015 Decree by Igor Plotnitsky, the then Head of the unrecognised entity, banning mass events while the area is under martial law, and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council.

The 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.

Of the 195 religious organisations registered in December 2019, 188 were of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate, four were Muslim, and one each were Old Believer, Jewish and Catholic, Sidorov noted.

The Religion Law bans 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. In September 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned.

In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or face punishment. "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." The Baptist Union reluctantly decided that its congregations could no longer meet publicly for services after the last Sunday worship on 10 March 2019.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, refused to tell Forum 18 if any other religious communities have gained registration since December 2019 or why applications from many communities – including all Protestant communities - have been refused.

Officials of the Registration Department of the Justice Ministry – which is supposed to register religious communities – have repeatedly refused absolutely to say which communities have been allowed to register and which have been refused, or give any overall statistics.

Culture, Sport and Youth Minister Sidorov claimed at the 26 December 2019 briefing that a "further range of organisations which have undergone the religious studies expert analysis are now in the stage of state registration with the LPR Justice Ministry".

Some religious communities have not applied for registration and so permission to exist. Council of Churches Baptists (who do not seek registration on principle as they see this as leading to state interference) are therefore regarded as "illegal". This is despite – as the Baptists have noted - the local Religion Law stating in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

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".

No registration – no gas, electricity, water

Religious communities which had a recognised place of worship but which failed to gain registration under LPR laws had their gas cut off in 2019, Baptist Pastor Serhii Moroz, who is originally from the region but now lives in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020. In late 2019 came the threat that electricity and water too would be cut off.

"Officials argue that they cannot supply gas, electricity and water to organisations that don't officially exist, as they can't have contracts with them," Pastor Moroz told Forum 18.

Communities which met in church members' homes have not had gas, electricity and water supplies cut, Pastor Moroz added.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, told Forum 18 she had not heard that gas, electricity and water supplies have been or are threatened with being cut off to places of worship that have not been able to gain registration.

"A long time with no priest"

In late 2019, the LPR authorities allowed the only Roman Catholic priest serving the local Catholic parishes – in Luhansk and Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka] - to return to the region. Fr Grzegorz Rapa returned in early December 2019. However, the LPR authorities have not yet told him if he can remain permanently or if he will have to leave again in March 2020 when three months are up.

Fr Rapa – a Polish priest who has served Luhansk's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish since 1993 – was earlier not allowed to live there permanently. "He can stay there for three months, then has to be out for three months," Bishop Jan Sobilo told Forum 18 in October 2019.

This means that in the three months when Fr Rapa is unable to visit Luhansk, Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass.

When Fr Rapa is unable to live in or visit Luhansk, Mass has to be broadcast over the internet via Skype to the congregation in the church. "They have to set up a screen on the altar and a projector," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. "It is like in Soviet times." He recalled that during Soviet years, a radio was often put on the altar of a church with no priest to broadcast Mass to the congregation.

Catholic nuns who used to work in the Luhansk parish left amid the conflict in 2014. "The people want them to work there again. We want them to," one Catholic told Forum 18.

The rebel LPR authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers. Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities isolated from their fellow-believers elsewhere.

"This year we lived for a long time with no priest," local Catholics wrote in a Christmas 2019 letter to the Vatican nuncio Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, who led the Christmas Mass in Luhansk on 25 December. "It was very difficult. And not only for us. Now he has returned, Fr Grzegorz has to work much harder to help us overcome all the difficulties we face. We are very grateful to our parish priest."

The letter – read out by a parishioner from the Stakhanov parish at the Christmas Mass in Luhansk – was posted on the Vatican Nunciature website. Archbishop Gugerotti also sent a copy to Pope Francis on 28 December 2019. The Pope responded later the same day with a hand written note, saying how touched he had been by the letter from the parishioners of Luhansk and Stakhanov and offering his prayers.

"It is not clear if the Luhansk authorities will allow Fr Rapa to remain there permanently, or if he will be required to leave again after three months," Catholics told Forum 18 on 5 February. "This is still being discussed." Catholics have been liaising with the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk.

However, Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department, refused to discuss with Forum 18 the difficulties the LPR authorities are causing Catholics by refusing to allow Fr Rapa to remain permanently in Luhansk to serve the Catholic community.

DONBAS: Luhansk: Soviet-era prisoner of conscience to be jailed again?

Officers of the State Security Ministry of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic threatened Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – with an "extremism" criminal prosecution if he continues to lead

worship without official permission. Prosecutors are still investigating Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest Anatoli Nazarenko on "extremism" charges.

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (04.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2wgsAXR> - Officers of the State Security Ministry of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine have threatened a Baptist pastor in the town of Krasnodon with criminal charges of "extremism" for refusing to halt his leadership of his congregation. Vladimir Rytikov – a Soviet-era prisoner of conscience – faced repeated administrative prosecution in 2018 and 2019.

The man who answered the phone at the State Security Ministry branch in Krasnodon refused to say if he was from the secret police or explain why the Ministry is considering bringing "extremism" criminal charges against Pastor Rytikov. The duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Luhansk refused to put Forum 18 through to anyone to discuss the case (see below).

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, stressed to Forum 18 that "we're not threatening" Pastor Rytikov (see below).

Pastor Rytikov, who is 60, leads the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne], just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. Like all Council of Churches congregations it does not seek official registration (see below).

The rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist". The 26 November 2019 ban came a week after Luhansk's Supreme Court overturned part of a lower court decision that Christian books seized from Pastor Rytikov should be destroyed. The Supreme Court left unchanged the pastor's fine of more than a month's average local wage (see below).

Prosecutors are still investigating the "extremism" case against Fr Anatoli Nazarenko, a priest of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. "No one is inviting him [for interrogation], but the investigation is continuing," local church members confirmed to Forum 18 in early February (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), which is internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration, which in January 2020 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), which is also internationally unrecognised. Heavy fighting ensued. The rebel administration in January 2020 controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The rebel-held area adjoins the rebel-held area of Luhansk Region.

"Illegal" religious communities

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not undergone local registration are illegal. They point to a May 2015 Decree by Igor Plotnitsky, the then Head of the unrecognised entity, banning mass events while the area was under martial law, and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council.

The 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.

Council of Churches Baptists (who do not seek registration on principle as they see this as leading to state interference) http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425">are therefore regarded as "illegal". This is despite – as the Baptists have noted - the local Religion Law stating in Article 3, Part 1 that people have the right to form religious associations, "but this is not obligatory".

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".

The Religion Law also bans 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. In September 2018 Jehovah's Witnesses were banned.

In March 2019, all Baptist Union congregations were ordered to halt public meetings for worship or face punishment. "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". The Baptist Union reluctantly decided that its congregations could no longer meet publicly for services after the last Sunday worship on 10 March 2019.

The rebel authorities have also banned many religious leaders from outside their territory from visiting their fellow believers. Officials have barred access by the Greek Catholic bishop and a Greek Catholic priest, the bishop of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and many Protestant leaders. This has left their local communities feeling isolated.

Soviet-era prisoner of conscience

The Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne], just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia, has met in the same location since 1961. The Church has been led for some years by Pastor Vladimir Rytikov.

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.

Raids, property seizures, fines, book bans

The Krasnodon Baptist congregation is among Protestant communities to have faced increased harassment since the rebels took control of parts of Luhansk Region in 2014.

Officials raided the church's regular Sunday meeting for worship in June 2018. Pastor Rytikov refused to pay a fine of 8,000 Russian Roubles (about five weeks' average wages

for those in formal work) handed down in July 2018 to punish him for leading an unapproved worship meeting.

In September 2018, court bailiffs opened proceedings to recover the money for the unpaid fine. In October 2018, they came to Pastor Rytikov's home in Krasnodon and summoned him to court that day. There, he told Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh that he had no intention of paying the fine because he does not regard himself as guilty of any wrongdoing.

Judge Kudrevatykh found him guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.26, Part 1 of failing to pay the fine. She handed him an additional punishment of 20 hours' community service. Pastor Rytikov appealed against this extra punishment to the LPR Supreme Court in Luhansk. On 14 November 2018, the court overturned the community service punishment. However, the July 2018 fine remained in force.

In November 2018, court bailiffs came to Pastor Rytikov's home, going through all the rooms, recording what property he had and taking photographs. In March 2019, court bailiffs again raided his home, accompanied by two police officers and two official witnesses. Not finding the car they had hoped to seize, they seized a bread maker and music centre.

In April 2019, police raided the Sunday worship meeting of the Krasnodon Church. They took Pastor Rytikov and two other leaders to the police station, where they fingerprinted, photographed and interrogated them. In June 2019, Krasnodon Town and District Court again fined Pastor Rytikov for leading unregistered worship.

Following an August 2019 police raid on Sunday worship, Krasnodon court fined one of Pastor Rytikov's colleagues, Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko.

The rebel authorities banned 12 books published by the Council of Churches Baptists – including the Gospel of John – as "extremist". The 26 November 2019 ban was made public on 12 December 2019, when the Justice Ministry published a list of the banned books on its website.

The ban came a week after Luhansk's Supreme Court overturned part of a lower court decision that Christian books seized from Pastor Rytikov 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.

Yelena Tsvetkova, the head of the Registration Department at the Justice Ministry, told Forum 18 in December 2019 that the government banning decision was not public. She insisted that all was in accordance with the law.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, dismissed reports that the government had banned 12 Baptist books, including the Gospel of John. Told that the list is on the Justice Ministry website, she told Forum 18 on 4 February 2020: "Anything can be put on a website. In any case, it is a different Ministry."

Secret police interrogation, threats

Officers of the LPR State Security Ministry arrived at the home of Pastor Vladimir Rytikov in the town of Krasnodon at about 5 pm on 28 January 2020, local Baptists told Forum 18. They took him to the Ministry branch in Krasnodon for questioning. "They told my wife not to worry and not to tell anyone, and they promised to bring me back home in half an hour," Pastor Rytikov noted.

"You've been brought to administrative responsibility for conducting worship services without registration?" officers asked Pastor Rytikov. He responded that he had.

"Are you continuing to gather?" officers asked him. He responded that they do. "Are you going to gather in future?" they asked. Pastor Rytikov said that they would.

Officers put other questions to him about his religious activity. "They then read me a warning that I am conducting extremist activity – that I incite people in sermons to extremism – and that I distribute extremist literature," Pastor Rytikov noted. "If that continues they'll bring me to criminal responsibility under Article 340.

Criminal Code Article 340 punishes "Public calls to carry out extremist activity" with, in Part 1, fines of 100 to 300 times the minimum monthly wage or an individual's income for between one and two years, or forced labour for up to three years or imprisonment of up to four years. Part 2 punishes the same actions with use of the media, telecommunications or the internet, with forced labour of up to five years or up to five years' imprisonment.

State Security officers also told Pastor Rytikov that a special commission which examined religious literature seized from him had ruled that it was "extremist".

The man who answered the phone on 4 February at the State Security Ministry branch in Krasnodon refused to say if he was from the secret police or explain why the Ministry is considering bringing "extremism" criminal charges against Pastor Rytikov. The duty officer at the State Security Ministry in Luhansk refused to put Forum 18 through to anyone to discuss the case.

Inna Sheryayeva, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, stressed to Forum 18 on 4 February that "we're not threatening" Pastor Rytikov.

Pastor Rytikov adamantly rejects the accusations of "extremism". Neither at worship services, nor in our literature is there anything extremist," he insisted. "If the Word of God – the Gospel of John indeed – is deemed an extremist book, this represents a rebellion against God himself and everything sacred!"

Other "extremism" prosecution threats

In April 2019 anti-"extremism" police raided and searched the Holy Trinity Cathedral and diocesan offices of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the city of Luhansk.

An officer of the police Department for Combating Extremism and Organised Crime in Luhansk insisted that "there are no repressions". Andrei Litsoev, then head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry blamed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine itself for the raid. "They're guilty," he insisted to Forum 18 in April 2019. "It is not registered, so it doesn't exist. They can't conduct their activity. They show no desire to legalise their situation."

Litsoev did not explain how they could be registered when the Religion Law bans all non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches from applying for state permission to exist.

Officials then began investigating charges that the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Luhansk was holding narcotics, then weapons, then "extremist" literature. Officials forced the two priests - Fr Anatoli Nazarenko and Fr Gennady Kurganov – to sign statements that they would not leave rebel-held territory. This restriction was not continued for Fr Kurganov.

Police prepared an "extremism" criminal investigation against Fr Nazarenko which they then handed on to prosecutors. Banned from leaving rebel-held territory, this ban was lifted in September 2019 after five months.

"A criminal case has not been opened, but the investigation has not been closed," one Orthodox Christian noted in October 2019 about the investigation into Fr Nazarenko. "A commission is apparently still studying the case. Of course, the literature they claim to have seized had nothing to do with us."

Prosecutors are still investigating the "extremism" case against Fr Nazarenko. "No one is inviting him [for interrogation], but the investigation is continuing," local church members confirmed to Forum 18 in early February 2020.

Four people hospitalized after anti-Semitic mob attack near Jewish holy site

i24NEWS (12.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2siIcZ6> - Jews in Uman, place of final rest for Rabbi Nachman, setting up self-defense group after pogrom-style attack.

At least four people were hospitalized after an angry mob of at least 30 people armed with sticks and knives attacked Jewish pilgrims Friday night in Ukraine's town of Uman. The incident was reported by head of Ukraine's Jewish Committee Eduard Dolinsky in a Facebook post on Sunday.

According to local media reports, the pogrom-style attack began with a minor strife between a Jew and one of the local residents.

The situation escalated as the Uman resident called in his friends to stage violent attacks on Jews, as 112.ua reported.

According to the witness accounts cited by the outlets, the police arrived on the scene but did little to protect the victims as the mob raged through the town, specifically seeking out Jews.

Referring to the incident as a 'pogrom', Dolinsky said the Uman Jews will set up self-defense groups due to the authorities' inaction.

Uman is the resting place of Rabbi Nachman, founder of Breslover Hassidic movement, with thousands of Orthodox Jews visiting the place every year to pray at the grave. The number of pilgrims rockets around Rosh a-Shana, the Jewish New Year.

The pilgrimages have not been well-received with some of the local residents, however, with anti-Semitic incidents reported in the area before.