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Forum 18 (Author)

"If we don't register, they'll come to every service and stop it"

Felix Corley, [Forum 18](#)

Russian Police and military officers (some with automatic weapons) raided Council of Churches Baptists' Sunday worship in Krasnodon on 25 January. "They said that if we don't register, they'll come to every service and stop it taking place," Pastor Vladimir Rytikov said of his interrogation at the police station. The same day, Police Anti-Extremism officers raided another nearby church. In September 2025, officials raided Muslim prayers in Mariupol and fined two imams. Between July and December 2025, officials raided at least seven worship meetings, with five subsequent fines.

In apparently coordinated raids, Russian officials raided the Sunday morning meetings for worship of two Council of Churches Baptist congregations on 25 January. Police and military officers (some armed with automatic weapons) raided the church in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. Simultaneously, Police Anti-Extremism officers raided the church in the nearby village of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Teple].

"They brusquely entered the hall of the prayer house and ordered all the men to stand up," Pastor Vladimir Rytikov noted of the raid on his church in the town of Krasnodon. The officers then noted the identities of some of those present. "They questioned me and very insistently demanded my phone." The officers accused church members of meeting illegally as the church has no Russian registration. They took Pastor Rytikov to the police station, where they interrogated him for some time. "They said that if we don't register, they'll come to every service and stop it taking place" (see below).

Officials at Krasnodon Police did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called (see below).

Russian officials have in recent years repeatedly raided meetings for

worship in the church Pastor Rytikov leads and courts have repeatedly fined him and other local Baptists (see below).

Between July and December 2025, Russian officials are known to have raided at least seven meetings for worship in Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Six of the communities were from the Council of Churches Baptists, who meet without seeking official permission. The other was a Muslim community. Officials brought administrative cases against at least 7 religious leaders following these raids, of which 5 have already ended with fines for "missionary activity" (see below).

In one day in September 2025, officials raided Muslim Friday prayers in a basement of a building in Mariupol and charged the two imams (both from Central Asia and recently arrived in Donetsk Region), and the local court had fined them for "missionary activity" (see below).

Officials from several Russian state agencies conducted the raids, including from the local police, the Police's Centre for Countering Extremism, Prosecutor's Office and Russia's FSB security service. FSB officials were mostly from the regional branches for Luhansk or Donetsk Regions (see below).

In two 2025 raids in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, officials were from the FSB's Constitutional Security Directorate, including in a [raid on a Baptist church in Amvrosiivka](#) in summer 2025, and on a Council of Baptists congregation in Mariupol in autumn 2025 (see below).

The duty officer at Donetsk Region FSB (who did not give his name) refused to put Forum 18 through on 27 January to any officer who could explain why Russia's FSB takes part in raids on individuals exercising freedom of religion or belief. He himself could not answer either. He also refused to explain the role of the FSB's Constitutional Security Directorate. "I'm not authorised to give comments," he told Forum 18 before putting the phone down.

In addition to these known raids on religious communities during worship meetings, officials brought a further two cases against individuals for alleged "missionary activity" of which one has already ended with a fine (see below).

An official at the Mariupol office of the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions about what it might have done (if anything) to protect the rights of Muslims and Baptists whose worship meetings in the city were raided. He referred all questions to the office in Donetsk (see below).

Karina Galkina of the press office of the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk, Darya Morozova, told Forum 18 on 28

January that it would respond about what Morozova might have done (if anything) to protect the rights of Muslims and Baptists whose worship meetings were raided and leaders punished.

Council of Churches Baptist congregations choose not to seek official registration in any country where they operate. They also usually refuse to notify the authorities of the start of their activity. Russian officials claim that their exercise of freedom of religion or belief – including meeting for worship or sharing their faith – is therefore illegal (see below).

In its latest report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, covering June to November 2025, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine again called on the Russian occupation authorities: "Respect the freedoms of expression, opinion, and religion, by .. allowing religious communities to practice their faith freely, subject only to the strict limits provided in international human rights law" (see below).

Russia's serious violations of freedom of religion or belief in occupied Ukraine

Russia [seriously violates freedom of religion or belief](#) and interlinked human rights in parts of Ukraine it illegally occupies (about a fifth of Ukraine's territory). Among such violations are:

- illegal annexation of territory and imposition of Russian law violating human rights;
- pressuring, kidnapping, torturing, jailing, and murdering religious leaders;
- seizing places of worship with no compensation;
- stopping meetings for worship, banning and closing religious communities;
- jailing prisoners of conscience for exercising freedom of religion or belief;
- transnational repression;
- banning religious texts and purging libraries;
- "anti-missionary" prosecutions; and
- the broadcasting of disinformation against religious communities and believers.

In a May 2025 report to the United Nations Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine ([A/HRC/59/67](#)), UN Secretary-General António Guterres repeated [earlier UN calls](#) for Russia to respect freedom of religion or belief. "The occupying authorities of the Russian Federation continued to restrict the right to freedom of religion and belief for certain religious communities in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine," he [declared](#).

"No individual should be criminally charged or detained simply for practising their religion, including in the forms of collective worship and

proselytizing, in accordance with international human rights law," Secretary-General Guterres [insisted](#). "Religious groups in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine should enjoy access to their places of worship and be able to gather freely for prayer and other religious practices."

In its latest report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, [covering 1 June – 30 November 2025](#), the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine issued a call to the Russian occupation authorities: "Respect the freedoms of expression, opinion, and religion, by ceasing all measures that seek to suppress Ukrainian identity, ending the prosecution of individuals for dissent, and allowing religious communities to practice their faith freely, subject only to the strict limits provided in international human rights law."

Russian-imposed punishments for meeting for worship, sharing faith

Russian occupation authorities are also imposing punishments for meeting for worship or sharing faith without Russian permission.

Russian citizens accused of "unlawful missionary activity" are prosecuted under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4, and can receive fines of 5,000 to 50,000 Russian Roubles. Foreign citizens can be fined 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5. They may also be expelled from the country. Registered organisations (also prosecuted under Part 4) can be fined up to 100,000 Russian Roubles.

The written authorisation required by anyone conducting missionary activity on behalf of a religious group includes "written confirmation of receipt and registration of the notification of the [group's] creation and commencement of activities". The lack of such notification is therefore often taken as evidence of "unlawful missionary activity", even if no group in fact exists.

This is despite a [15 October 2018 Russian Constitutional Court ruling](#) that failure to submit notification of the existence of a religious group does not in isolation constitute an offence under Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity").

Lawsuits in Russia to ban religious communities' activities are [invariably linked to accusations of "unlawful missionary activity"](#). This is apparently both because it can be used as evidence of the de facto existence of a religious group, as in a [2022 Russian Constitutional Court ruling](#), and because it provides additional grounds for prohibition, given that lack of notification is in itself not enough.

On 27 December 2016, the Plenum of Russia's Supreme Court issued a resolution [partially clarifying the process of prohibiting a religious group's activities](#), but still leaving much to the discretion of both prosecutors and judges.

According to Point 5, if a group leader has not submitted notification, "the prosecutor has the right to file an administrative claim to prohibit the activities of such a religious association in court". Point 24 states that religious groups' activities may be prohibited on the same grounds that registered religious organisations may be liquidated, ie. "implementation .. of activities prohibited by law, or in violation of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, or with other repeated or gross violations of the law or other legal acts", but also, crucially, that "Based on the specifics of the creation and legal status of a religious group, as enshrined in the Law on Freedom of Conscience, failure to submit notification of the commencement of its activities cannot in itself be grounds for prohibiting the activities of such a group".

Council of Churches Baptist congregations – who are [often prosecuted in Russian-occupied Ukraine](#) for "missionary" activity - choose not to seek official registration in any country where they operate. They also usually refuse to notify the authorities of the start of their activity. Russian officials claim that their exercise of freedom of religion or belief – including meeting for worship or sharing their faith – is therefore illegal.

Krasnodon town: Police raid Baptist meeting

On 25 January, Russian Police and military officers (some armed with automatic weapons) and other officials raided the Sunday morning worship service of the Council of Churches Baptists in the town of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region.

"The Police officers told us the others in plain clothes were the boss from Luhansk, a lieutenant colonel and others with him," the church's Pastor Vladimir Rytikov noted.

"They brusquely entered the hall of the prayer house and ordered all the men to stand up," Pastor Rytikov added. The officers then noted the identities of some of those present. "They questioned me and very insistently demanded my phone. I said I didn't have my phone with me. They asked where it was, and that I go back home to get it. But I repeated that I didn't have my phone with me."

The officers accused church members of meeting illegally as the church has no Russian registration. They took Pastor Rytikov to the police station, where they interrogated him for some time. "They said that if we don't register, they'll come to every service and stop it taking place," Pastor

Rytikov said.

Pastor Rytikov explained to the police officers why the church does not seek registration "but they insisted on their own view" that its meetings are illegal. "The discussion was very crude, with rudeness and swearing," he noted.

Officials at Krasnodon Police did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called on 27 and 28 January.

Russian officials have in recent years repeatedly [raided meetings for worship](#) in the church Pastor Rytikov leads and courts have repeatedly fined him and other local Baptists.

Krasnodon village: Police raid Baptist meeting

On 25 January, Russian Police Centre for Countering Extremism officers raided the Sunday morning worship service of the Council of Churches Baptists in the village of Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Teple], 15 kms west of the town of Krasnodon in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. Officers took statements from the church's two pastors, Pyotr Tatarenko and V. Dmitrienko. "In conversation the officers exerted pressure to register the church," Pastor Tatarenko noted.

Stakhanov: Raid on Baptist meeting

On Friday 1 August 2025, Russian officials raided the Council of Churches Baptist congregation during their meeting for worship in the town of Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka] in Luhansk Region. Officials accused the community of missionary activity and failing to notify the Russian authorities of the start of their activity, local Baptists noted.

On 7 October 2025, Stakhanov Prosecutor's Office summoned the church's leader, Pastor Andrey Khmelevskoy. Prosecutors handed him a record of an offence under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). Prosecutors handed the case to Stakhanov Town Court.

On 27 October 2025, at the second hearing in the case, Judge Oksana Krotova of the Russian-controlled Stakhanov Town Court found Pastor Khmelevskoy guilty of conducting unapproved "missionary activity". She fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles (several days' average local wage). Stakhanov's Prosecutor took part in the hearing.

"Making up my accusation of missionary activity were a photo of the prayer house, secretly recorded video of the start of a service I was leading, as well as a mass of fabricated accusations," Pastor Khmelevskoy

said.

"The Stakhanov Town Court decision understands holding normal services, in which our brother takes part together with fellow believers, as conducting missionary activity," church members complained on 8 November 2025. They point to Article 16 of Russia's Religion Law, which allows holding religious meetings in homes without additional requirements.

Pastor Khmelevskoy appealed against the fine to Luhansk Supreme Court. On 10 December 2025, Judge Olga Andrushchenko rejected his appeal and left the fine unchanged, according to court records. Stakhanov's Russian-appointed Acting Prosecutor, Andrey Ryabko, represented the Prosecutor's Office at the hearing.

Officials at Stakhanov Prosecutor's Office did not answer the phone each time Forum 18 called between 26 and 28 January 2026.

Mariupol: Raid on Baptist meeting

In autumn 2025, Russian officials raided a morning meeting for worship of the Council of Churches Baptist church in Ilych District of Mariupol in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region. The officials – from the District Prosecutor's Office, accompanied by officers of the Russian FSB's Constitutional Security Directorate and the FSB's Regional Department – claim to have been undertaking an inspection in line with Russia's 2002 Anti-Extremism Law, according to the subsequent court decision.

On 22 October 2025, Prosecutors handed a case against Pastor Vladimir Protsenko to the Russian-controlled Ilich District of Mariupol under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). On 30 October 2025, Judge Yuliya Golovchenko found him guilty and fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles (several days' average local wage), according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

The decision claims that officials had established during the raid (which it called an "inspection") that between 10 and 12 am that morning, Pastor Protsenko was leading "a gathering of persons professing Christianity organised for residents and visitors of the city, with the aim of carrying out activities aimed at disseminating information about their doctrine (its religious postulates) among persons who are not participants (members, followers) of this religious association, accompanied by the reading of the Gospel". About 150 people were present.

The decision claimed the Council of Churches Baptist congregation there had functioned since 2022, an apparent reference to the date of the Russian takeover of Mariupol. It noted that the congregation had not notified the Russian authorities of the start of its activity.

An official at the Mariupol office of the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 28 January about what it might have done (if anything) to protect the rights of Baptists and Muslims whose worship meetings in the city were raided. He referred all questions to the office in Donetsk.

Sverdlovsk: Police out of time in attempted "missionary" prosecution

On 10 August, Russian Police and Police Centre for Countering Extremism officers [raided the Sunday morning meeting for worship](#) of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region. Officers filmed those present.

When the church finished its worship service, police officers searched the home where the church meets. Police told church members they had a search warrant approved by a court as officials suspected the church had weapons. Officers also photographed religious literature they found in the church.

Police in Sverdlovsk summoned Pastor Pyotr Tatarenko on 5 November 2025. "They again took a statement from me about the service in Sverdlovsk on 10 August," he noted the same day. "Then they immediately drew up a record of an offence for missionary activity and handed it to the court."

On 21 November 2025, however, Pastor Tatarenko received a letter from the Russian-controlled Sverdlovsk Town Court informing him that the case was being sent back to the police. The court said that because 90 days had expired since the event, it could no longer consider the case because of the statute of limitations.

Makeyevka: FSB, Police raid Baptist service, court fines Pastor

On 28 August, the Russian Police's Centre for Countering Extremism reported on the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Makeyevka in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region.

On 7 September 2025, officers of the Russian FSB, Police and Prosecutor's Office raided the church's Sunday morning worship meeting. "They waited for the end of the service, then conducted a search and talks with several church members, which they recorded," church members noted. Officers took photos.

The Prosecutor's Office summoned Pastor Aleksandr Voitukhov the following day. On 15 September 2025, Makeyevka's Acting Prosecutor Maksim Klimenko drew up a record of an offence under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity") for conducting an "illegal" worship service.

On 18 September 2025, Prosecutors handed the case to Makeyevka's Central-City District Court. On 2 October, Judge Valeriya Alborova found Pastor Voitukhov guilty and fined him 5,000 Russian Roubles (several days' average local wage), according to the decision seen by Forum 18. Makeyevka's Acting Prosecutor Klimenko led the prosecution case in court. Pastor Voitukhov did not attend, asking for the court to go ahead in his absence.

The court decision notes that the 7 September inspection by officers of the Police's Centre for Countering Extremism and Donetsk Region FSB "established that between 10:00 a.m. and 12:02 p.m., in the premises located at the above-mentioned address, under the leadership of A.A. Voitukhov, a gathering of persons professing Christianity was organised for residents and visitors of Makeyevka, for the purpose of carrying out activities aimed at disseminating information about their doctrine (its religious postulates) among persons who are not participants (members, followers) of this religious association, accompanied by the reading of the Gospel".

Krasny Luch: Police raid Baptist meeting

Russian Police Centre for Countering Extremism officers raided the Sunday morning worship service on 14 December 2025 of the Council of Churches Baptists in the town of Krasny Luch [official Ukrainian name Khrustalny] in Russian-occupied Luhansk Region.

"When the service was over, they conducted an inspection of the premises and took statements from Pastor Anatoly Krutik, as well as the woman who owns the house and three other church members," local Baptists noted on 17 December 2025. "When they had finished the inspection, they left the prayer house."

Khartsyzk: Officials raid Baptist meeting

On 23 December 2025, officials raided the worship service of the Council of Churches Baptists in the town of Khartsyzk in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region.

In early January 2026, officials charged the pastor, Oleg Stroyev, under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"). The case was presented to the Russian-controlled

Khartsyzk Inter-District Court on 23 January, according to court records. The case is due to be heard by Judge Roman Tashchilin.

"Officials have questioned us, and inspected the church building more than once," one church member told Forum 18.

Mariupol: Russian FSB, Prosecutor's Office raid Muslim prayers, fines follow

On 19 September 2025, officials from the Russian-controlled Mariupol Prosecutor's Office and the Mariupol office of the Russian FSB raided Muslim Friday prayers in a prayer room in the basement of a building in the city.

E. Orekhova of Mariupol Prosecutor's Office charged two prayer leaders, Nomozdjon Komilov and Saparali Kholov, under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 5 ("Foreigners conducting missionary activity"). Both are foreign citizens, apparently from Central Asia. Kholov had arrived in April 2025 and Komilov only in July 2025.

Orekhova handed the cases the same day to Mariupol's Zhovtnev District Court. Also that same day, Judge Pavel Belousov held both hearings and found both Komilov and Kholov guilty of conducting "illegal missionary activity". He fined each 30,000 Russian Roubles (three weeks' average local wage), according to the decisions seen by Forum 18. He did not order either deported.

Neither Komilov nor Kholov appealed against the punishments and the decisions came into force on 31 September 2025.

"The inspection revealed that in one of the non-residential premises .. in the basement is a prayer room where namaz is held daily at 5:20 am, 1:00 pm, 5:00 pm, 6:50 pm, and 8:25 pm," the court decisions note. "The prayers are conducted (organised) by S.Kh. Kholov and N.M. Komilov. The duration of the prayer is 5 minutes. Namaz is held daily at the above-mentioned times, with the number of people varying from 2 to 20."

Kholov told the court that he had served as an imam in his home country from 2004 until March 2025 and had regularly led prayers. "Kholov has no documents for carrying out religious activity in the Russian Federation," the court decision notes.

An official at the Mariupol office of the Russian-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson for Donetsk refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 28 January about what it might have done (if anything) to protect the rights of Muslims and Baptists whose worship meetings in the city were raided. He referred all questions to the office in Donetsk.

Donetsk Region: "Missionary" fines

On 11 December 2025, a case was handed to the Russian-controlled Debaltsevo Town Court in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region against Olga Gerasimchuk for alleged "missionary activity". On 29 December 2025, Judge Natalya Komardina found her guilty and punished her under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4 ("Russians conducting missionary activity"), according to court records.

Gerasimchuk did not appeal against the punishment and it entered legal force on 13 January 2026.

Elsewhere in Russian-occupied Donetsk Region, on 16 December 2025, a case was handed to the Russian-controlled Dokuchayevsk Town Court against Valery Savanu for alleged "missionary activity". On 15 January 2026, Judge Nikita Biryuchkov found him guilty and punished him under Russian Administrative Code Article 5.26, Part 4, according to court records.

Communities' forced registration under Russian law

The Russian occupation authorities insist that religious communities that want to exist [must register under Russian law](#) (or at least notify the authorities of their existence). Their leaders must have accepted Russian citizenship.

As of late January 2026, the Russian authorities have registered 203 communities in the occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia Region, 167 in the occupied parts of Kherson Region, 460 in the occupied parts of Donetsk Region, 397 in the occupied parts of Luhansk Region, 116 in the occupied Crimean city of Sevastopol and 860 in the rest of the occupied Crimean peninsula.

Communities banned in Russia – like Jehovah's Witnesses – have been stripped of registration. Communities the Russian authorities do not like – including the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Greek Catholic Church (with the exception of Crimea, where they have been allowed to register as "Catholics of the Byzantine Rite", and one community with no priest in Donetsk), and Roman Catholics (with the exception of Crimea, and one community with no priest in Luhansk) – do not have Russian registration and therefore cannot openly meet.

Communities that wish to retain links to Ukrainian headquarter bodies or associations (including Orthodox communities directly under the Ukrainian Orthodox Church) are not allowed to register. The Russian authorities have registered some Muslim and Protestant communities which have either cut ties to Ukrainian headquarter bodies and linked to Russian-based bodies or remain independent.

On 28 December 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law which includes a requirement that religious organisations registered before Russia illegally annexed Ukraine's Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions are required to bring their statutes into line with Russian law by 15 March 2027. Those that fail to do so will lose their legal status.

It appears that the religious organisations likely to have to change their statutes are those registered by the Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics" between 2014 and 2022. These communities were incorporated wholesale into Russian registers of legal entities. Communities in occupied parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson Regions had to register afresh under Russian law. Russian occupation authorities do not recognise Ukrainian registrations. (END)

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