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Crimean Muslims denied right to assemble for traditional ritual

Russian occupiers prohibit celebration of end of fast

Russia Religion News (21.07.2015) – <http://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/150721b.html> - In Bakhchisarai (Crimea), police prevented residents of the sixth micro-district Khan Chaiyr to celebrate the traditional holiday of Uraza-Bairam [Eid ul-Fitr], faky.ictv.ua reports.

Local residents said that the police forbade conducting the event because of the large crowd of people. Assembling was permitted only in small groups.

Over the course of many years, every year massive celebration of the Muslim holidays of Uraza-Bairam and Kurban-Bairam has occurred near the mosque in the sixth micro-district. Because of the prohibition on conduct of the holiday, some Muslims decided to arrange a celebration on the territory of their residential area. (tr. by PDS, posted 22 July 2015)

Baptists in Crimea split over whether to join Russian union

Segment of Crimean Baptists decide to join Russian Union of Baptists

Religiia v Ukraine (09.07.2015) - Representatives of 28 Baptist churches of Crimea decided to register a regional association under the wing of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. This was reported on his blog by the chief editor of International Christian Newspaper, Andreas Patts, Religiia v Ukraine reports, with a reference to Invictory.

This decision was adopted on 7 July during a pastors' conference in the central Baptist church of Simferopol. The chairman of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (RSEKhB), Aleksei Smirnov, participated in the conference.

Smirnov explained that the initiative for Crimean churches joining the Russian union belonged exclusively to Christians of Crimea. He also emphasized that the Moscow leadership is motivated merely by a desire to help fellow believers in the process of registration, so that "local churches would be able to perform ministry and to fulfill that to which they are called, without impediment."

In addition, the head of Russian Baptists described a telephone conversation with the chairman of the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Valery Antoniuk, that occurred on the eve of his visit to Crimea. Smirnov said that he invited his Ukrainian colleague to the upcoming conference. The latter cited his tight schedule and blessed Aleksei Vasilievich for his trip and holding the constituent conference.

Conference participants represented churches on the basis of one delegate for every 40 members. They all unanimously (100%) voted for joining the REKhB and just as unanimously elected the head of the association, Presbyterian Alexander Maikan. The candidacies of the first two vice-chairmen also did not evoke objections from the audience. Sergei Medvedev (Sevastopol) and Sergei Kozarenko, the presbyter of the church in Simferopol, were elected as vice-chairmen.

The Crimean association will join the Baptist churches of the southern region of the Russian federation. The pastor of the Novocherkassk church, Vladimir Romanenko, who represented this region, delivered greetings from the brotherhood of the south of the country and delivered a sermon of exhortation to the newly elected leadership of the Crimean association.

Previously, 39 churches of the once united Crimean association of Baptists founded and registered a separate autonomous union. It is headed by a presbyter of the Yalta church, Veniamin Yukhimets. How relations between the two Baptist associations in Crimea will develop is still not clear. (tr. by PDS, posted 9 July 2015)

Things turn bad for Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea

Simferopol: Russian authorities accuse JW preaching in street of unsanctioned picketing

Portal-credo.ru (06.07.2015) - Representatives of the Russian police in Simferopol (Crimea) drew up eight reports on 2 July against Jehovah's Witnesses of violation by the organizer of a public event of the established procedure for conducting it (on the basis of part 20.2 of the Code of Administrative Violations of Law, which provides for punishment in the form of required labor of up to 40 hours or a fine of up to 20,000 rubles) while performing their traditional street witnessing. This was reported by the news agency Kryminform, with reference to the press service of the local police.

The news agency was told by an unnamed source in law enforcement agencies that Jehovah's Witnesses stood two-by-two at stands containing religious literature in various spots in the city, and they were brought to account "within the framework of a raid."

At mid-May, the 22 Crimean congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses were immediately granted reregistration by the Russian authorities in the annexed territory of Crimea: Armiansk, Dzhankoi (2), Kerch, Krasnoperekopsk, Saki, Sevastopol (2), Simferopol, Staryi Krym, Feodosiia, and Yalta, as well as in the villages of Brianskoe, Voskhod, Gvardeiskoe, Krasnogvardeiskoe, Mirnyi, Nizhnegorskii, Pervomaiskii, Razdolnoe, Chernomorskii, and Shchelkino. In addition to registered organizations in Crimea, 84 unregistered groups of Jehovah's Witnesses are functioning. In all, about 7,000 active adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion reside on the peninsula. (tr. by PDS, posted 15 May 2015)

"Expert conclusions" force structure and activity changes

Forum 18 (25.06.2015) - "Expert conclusions" by Russia's Justice Ministry Expert Council have led to some Crimean religious organisations having to make changes to get re-registration under Russian law, Forum 18 News Service notes. These included the Crimean Muftiate which had to cut its ties to the Crimean Tatar Mejlis (a political organisation), while Catholic parishes had to formally cut ties with their Diocese of Odessa-Simferopol in southern Ukraine. "Observations" in the "expert conclusion" on the Tavrida Muftiate – the smaller of the two Muftiates in Crimea – have so far blocked its re-registration, more than a year after it applied.

Tavrida Muftiate is the only one which has failed to gain re-registration. A Yalta Lutheran congregation which also had "observations" in its "expert conclusion", instructing it to change its statute, was able to gain re-registration in May.

"We hope to get state registration in the very near future," Alim Emirsaliyev, spokesperson for the Tavrida Muftiate, told Forum 18 on 26 June. "We wish to be able to continue our activity in full accordance with the law."

The Tavrida Muftiate's Mufti, Ruslan Saitvaliyev has been fined nearly a week's average local wage for possession of "extremist" literature (see F18News 26 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2076)

"Expert analyses"

Only some of Crimea's religious communities applying for re-registration under Russian law had to undergo "expert analysis" in Moscow (see F18News 30 January 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2028). These included communities independent of any existing registered centralised religious organisation, those which function in more than one Russian administrative territory (Sevastopol is administratively separate from the Republic of Crimea), and those – such as the Catholic parishes and Pastoral District – which the Russian authorities were for some reason uncertain about. Registration applications from communities which function in more than one Russian administrative territory have to be dealt with in Moscow (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

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

On 25 June Forum 18 asked Svetlana Boyeva of the department that registers religious organisations at the Justice Ministry in Moscow about the "observations" in the "expert conclusion" that have prevented the Tavrida Muftiate gaining re-registration. But she responded that she is not authorised to discuss anything.

Slow re-registration

Re-registration of Crimea's religious communities under Russian law seems to be proceeding slowly. It appears that fewer than 100 have been re-registered. As of 24 June (the most recent update), only 55 religious communities were listed on the Justice Ministry website in Moscow as having state registration. However, Forum 18 knows of at least another 30 registered communities that have state registration which have yet to be listed on the Justice Ministry website. The United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) has expressed concern about the consequences of the re-registration requirement for Crimea's religious communities (see F18News 2 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2068).

A total of 1,546 religious communities had state registration with the Ukrainian authorities at the time Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

The re-registration deadline for Crimea's religious communities which wish to continue to enjoy legal status under Russian rule has twice been extended. The deadline is now 1 January 2016. Any communities which fail to gain re-registration by then will lose legal status.

Under Russian law, an unregistered religious community should be able to operate as a religious group, which does not require registration, and meet privately for worship and study (see F18News 14 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=543).

Tavrida Muftiate registration – rejected or stalled?

The Tavrida Muftiate – which has just over 30 mosques and prayer rooms in Crimea – has complained of the long delays in getting state registration as a centralised religious organisation under Russian Law. "We first lodged our application to the Justice Department in Simferopol more than a year ago," a member of the Tavrida Muftiate told Forum 18. "We were one of the first."

Like all religious communities seeking registration as a centralised organisation (with communities in more than one federal territory of the Russian Federation), the Tavrida Muftiate needed registration from the Justice Ministry in Moscow. It also needed a positive "expert conclusion" from the Justice Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis. Since early 2015 the Expert Council has been headed by Viktoriya Burkovskaya, a Moscow law professor.

Justice Department officials repeatedly told Tavrida Muftiate officials that the necessary "expert analysis" in Moscow had been completed successfully, the Muftiate member told Forum 18. Twice, however, the Muftiate was then told that the application was inadequate and needed further work. "It was months between being told everything was OK and being told we needed to make further corrections."

Enver Akhmetov, the Chair of the Tavrida Muftiate, had been in Moscow in February and been told that the application was in order, the Muftiate member added. Only in mid-June had the Justice Department in Simferopol handed the community the "expert conclusion". "We waited five months for this, only to hear we made mistakes," he

lamented. He said the Muftiate's lawyer is now working on revising the application before resubmitting it yet again.

Irina Demetskaya, the former head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Department in Simferopol and now the Deputy Head of the Justice Department, is away from the office until 29 June, her colleague told Forum 18 on 24 June. The colleague, who did not give his name, said the Tavrida Muftiate's registration application is "under consideration" but declined to answer any other questions about the application or any other re-registration issue.

"Observations" stall application

The most recent "expert conclusion" on the Tavrida Muftiate, seen by Forum 18, was handed down by the Expert Council on 12 May and signed by Expert Council head Burkovskaya. While the Expert Council took between two and 10 weeks to produce the 14 other such "expert conclusions" on Crimean religious communities in 2015, it took 14 weeks to produce its conclusion on the Tavrida Muftiate, Forum 18 notes.

Under the 2009 Russian Justice Ministry Order, such "expert analyses" should be completed within three months, though an extra month can be requested in writing if extra information is needed. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if an extra month was requested for the Tavrida Muftiate conclusion.

The "expert conclusions" on the nine Catholic parishes, as well as on the Crimean Muftiate, Baptist Union, and two Karaite communities – signed by Expert Council head Burkovskaya and seen by Forum 18 – simply conclude that the communities are indeed religious and that the information presented in the applications is reliable. By contrast, only the "expert conclusions" on the Tavrida Muftiate and on the Yalta Lutheran congregation contain "observations".

The Expert Council claims in its concluding "observations" that the Tavrida Muftiate had failed to provide information about its history and emergence, how it would operate and how the civil rights and obligations of its spiritual leaders might or might not be restricted. Although the Expert Council makes no decision on whether or not these "observations" have any bearing on whether or not the Justice Ministry should grant registration, the Justice Ministry has used the "expert conclusion" to justify returning the registration application to the Tavrida Muftiate.

Forum 18 asked Expert Council head Burkovskaya in writing on the afternoon of 24 June via her legal firm in Moscow why the Expert Council she chairs appears to have singled out the Tavrida Muftiate in particular for extensive "observations" which other religious communities did not receive. Forum 18 had received no response by the middle of the working day in Moscow on 26 June.

Yalta Lutherans – correction before re-registration

Burkovskaya's "expert conclusion" on the Augsburg Lutheran St Mary congregation in Yalta was issued on 24 February. The registration application was one of 13 sent to Moscow for "expert analysis" which had by March 2015 sent to Moscow for "expert analysis".

Like all the other "expert conclusions", the February Lutheran "conclusion" agrees that the congregation is a religious community and that the information it provided in the registration application was trustworthy. It was the only other of the 15 "expert analyses" to contain "observations". However, the community is listed on Russia's

Federal Tax Service website as having gained re-registration on 7 May. It was not yet listed on the Justice Ministry website as of 24 June.

The "expert conclusion" claims that the congregation's statute is "not in accord with the doctrine of Lutheran teaching" because it includes as an aim maintaining international contacts "including for the purposes of pilgrimage". The Expert Council believes this contradicts a statement elsewhere in the statute: "Lutherans do not venerate the Virgin Mother, angels, saints, the cult of relics and holy remains." It called on the congregation to change its statute to "correct" this.

It remains unclear what would happen were the congregation to undertake a pilgrimage.

Other Lutheran congregations listed on the Justice Ministry website as registered - in Simferopol, Yevpatoriya and Sevastopol - did not need to undergo "expert analysis" by the Expert Council.

Crimean Muftiate adjustments to Russian requirements

The Crimean Muftiate and Catholic parishes have had to adjust their organisation to be able to get positive "expert conclusions" from the Justice Ministry's Expert Council in Moscow, Forum 18 notes.

The Justice Ministry sent the Crimean Muftiate's application to the Expert Council on 29 January, and the conclusion was issued on 13 February. This was the first such "expert conclusion" of a religious organisation in 2015 and was completed in just two weeks. This period included a 6 February meeting in Moscow at which Muftiate officials were asked to provide more documentation.

The Justice Ministry in Moscow re-registered the Crimean Muftiate on 16 February and the organisation received its re-registration certificate on 27 February (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

The "expert conclusion" notes that while Crimea was under Ukrainian rule, the Muftiate "co-operated with organisations banned in Russia", including organisations in Ukraine linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. "One needs to bear in mind on this that the given organisations were not banned in Ukraine, where the Muftiate was operating at that time," the "expert conclusion" notes. It added that Muftiate Chair Ayder Ismailov has assured the Expert Council in his answers "that any such co-operation has ceased".

The "expert conclusion" also notes that, under its previous statute registered under Ukrainian law, the Chief Mufti of the Muftiate was governed not only by decisions of the Kurultai of Crimean Muslims but of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, a political organisation. However, by the time the statute was submitted for registration under Russian law in 2014, the reference to the Crimean Tatar Mejlis had been removed.

Catholic adjustments to Russian requirements

At the time of the Russian annexation, Crimea's Catholic parishes were an integral part of the southern Ukrainian Odessa and Simferopol Diocese, headed by Bishop Bronislaw Bernacki and based in the Ukrainian city of Odessa. The Diocese's assistant bishop, Jacek Pyl, was already based in Simferopol.

Like the Crimean Muftiate, the nine Crimean Catholic parishes which have gained positive "expert conclusions" in 2015 (all were issued on 8 April) also had to adjust their structures to meet Justice Ministry demands, Forum 18 notes. The conclusion for St

Clement's parish in Sevastopol, for example, notes that the parish held a meeting on 28 December 2014 "on leaving the Odessa-Simferopol Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church".

Applications for this and other Catholic parishes in Crimea also contained copies of 22 December 2014 and 21 February 2015 letters from the Holy See's Secretariat of State "on the creation in Crimea and Simferopol of a centralised religious organisation of a Pastoral District of Crimea and Simferopol and the subordination to the District of local Roman Catholic religious organisations".

However, these two letters from the Holy See were not enough. The Justice Ministry required a further letter from the Head of the Pastoral District, Bishop Pyl, submitted on 17 March, "about the canonical subordination of the organisation," according to the "expert conclusions". In the case of the Sevastopol Parish, the Justice Ministry sought further information on its canonical subordination from the Chair of the Parish Council.

Having been satisfied about the "canonical subordination", the Expert Council confirmed that the nine Catholic parishes are religious organisations and that the information in the applications was trustworthy.

Will Catholic Pastoral District be registered?

Only negotiations between the Holy See's Secretariat of State and the Russian Federation's representation to the Holy See allowed the Catholic Church to agree a new structure that allowed their parishes in Crimea to be able to gain re-registration. Bishop Pyl insisted in February that the Pastoral District was created within the Odessa and Simferopol Diocese on 22 December 2014 "exclusively for administrative purposes" to facilitate registration.

The Pastoral District was refused registration as a centralised religious organisation in December 2014. Simferopol Justice Department officials told the Catholics they would have to register all their parishes first, before three of them could then officially form a centralised organisation which could apply for state registration, Bishop Pyl noted in January 2015 (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

Nine Crimean Catholic parishes - including St Clement's Church in Sevastopol - gained re-registration between 21 May and 2 June. Forum 18 has been unable to establish if the Pastoral District has now applied for registration as a centralised religious organisation and, if so, if the application has been sent for an "expert conclusion" from the Expert Council.

Will St Clements' Church regain its church building?

Interestingly, the "expert conclusion" for St Clement's Church makes clear that the parish was deprived of its church building in 1936 and that after the end of the Soviet Union it has tried repeatedly under Ukrainian and Russian rule to regain it. These attempts include in 2000 launching a case against the Ukrainian government at the European Court of Human Rights (ECTHR) in Strasbourg (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

Sevastopol city officials have repeatedly refused to return the confiscated church to the Catholic parish, stating that it will be renovated and turned into a children's cinema. One claimed reason was that the community had not asked for it back. Another claim was that the priest is a foreign citizen (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

Finued for books that "have absolutely nothing to do with the mufti"

Forum 18 (24.06.2015) - The chief mufti of one of Crimea's two main Muslim bodies - Ruslan Saitvaliyev, mufti of the Tavrida Muftiate - insists that the fine on him handed down in late May for alleged possession of "extremist" material is unjust. "The books have absolutely nothing to do with the mufti or the Muftiate," one local Muslim familiar with the case told Forum 18 News Service on 24 June. Saitvaliyev says he has no control over the mosque where the books were found during a Prosecutor's Office raid. His appeal is due at Crimea's Supreme Court in the capital Simferopol on 2 July.

The Tavrida Muftiate, of which Saitvaliyev is a leading figure, has again been denied state registration under Russian law, following a Justice Ministry "expert conclusion" in Moscow which made "observations" on the application. Other "expert conclusions" on Crimean religious communities seen by Forum 18 show that some - including the Crimean Muftiate and Catholic parishes - have had to change their structures and activities to Russian requirements to gain state registration (see F18News 26 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2076).

The fine on Mufti Saitvaliyev is the latest in Crimea under Russia's Administrative Code Article 20.29. This punishes "Production or distribution of extremist materials" recorded on the Russian Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials with, for individuals, a fine or imprisonment of up to 15 days and confiscation of the banned literature.

Prosecutions have mostly followed raids on mosques, madrassahs (Islamic schools), homes, libraries, bookshops, politicians' offices, hostels and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 (see Forum 18's Crimea religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Meanwhile, the eighth member of a group of Council of Churches Baptists who held an outdoor religious event in a village in central Crimea has been fined. Appeals by the other seven are being heard by Crimea's Supreme Court (see below).

The fines come as a proposed new administrative offence of "religious agitation in public places" in Crimea has been dropped (see below).

Mosque raided

Simferopol Prosecutor's Office official Anna Ober led a police raid on the morning of 19 May on an independent mosque in Kamenka on the north-eastern edge of the Crimean capital. "Violations occurred during the search," the Muslim complained to Forum 18. "Officers went into all rooms in the mosque at once, and mosque representatives didn't have the chance to bring in their own witnesses. The police had brought their own witnesses. Besides, no record of a search was drawn up."

Officers claim to have found four extremist books, related to "Wahhabi Islam and the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement", the Muslim noted. "Who knows if they were there in the mosque or if anyone planted them there? Anyone can have access to a mosque and leave materials there." He insisted that the Tavrida Muftiate has repeatedly spoken out against radicalism as "it is not in accord with Islam".

That same morning, the Prosecutor's Office official phoned Mufti Saitvaliyev from the mosque, even though it is an independent community and not part of the Tavrida Muftiate. The Mufti was then summoned and shown the books the police claim to have

found.

Reached on 24 June and asked why Mufti Saitvaliyev had been prosecuted, Ober of the Prosecutor's Office claimed it was a wrong number and put the phone down.

Fine

A record of an "offence" was drawn up only against Mufti Saitvaliyev under Administrative Code Article 20.29. On 26 May, Judge Viktor Mozhelyansky of Simferopol's Kiev District Court found him guilty and fined him the maximum 3,000 Russian Roubles (1,200 Ukrainian Hryvnias, 430 Norwegian Kroner, 50 Euros or 55 US Dollars), a chancellery official told Forum 18 from the court on 16 June. This is nearly a week's average local wage, according to Crimean residents.

Protesting his innocence, Mufti Saitvaliyev's appeal against the fine reached Crimea's Supreme Court on 10 June, according to court records. The appeal was assigned to Judge Natalya Mostovenko and is due to be heard on the afternoon of 2 July.

Fined for books in prayer room

Another individual has been fined for religious books which the Russian authorities deem "extremist" which were found in a location under their authority.

On 3 April, police in Simferopol raided a hostel for students of a medical academy. They found in a prayer room two Muslim books which are on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials: "Muhammad: May God bless him" by the late Indian Muslim theologian Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri (banned by a Penza Region court in 2008) and "Instruction to Rulers" by a medieval mystic and scholar Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (banned by an Orenburg Region court in 2012).

Prosecutors insisted that the two books had been in the prayer room and accessible from 18 March to the day of the raid, according to the subsequent court decision seen by Forum 18. They brought a case under Administrative Code Article 20.29 against the warden of the hostel, V. Berezyak.

At her trial at Simferopol's Zheleznodorozhny District Court on 25 May, Berezyak confirmed that the books had been in the prayer room. But she insisted that "access to it by women is restricted". Judge Vasili Zlotnikov found that as the person responsible for the institution, she was thus responsible for the "offence". He fined her 2,000 Russian Roubles, according to the court decision.

Berezyak did not appeal against the decision and has paid the fine, an aide to Judge Zlotnikov told Forum 18 from the court on 24 June.

Another administrative case under Article 20.29 was heard at Simferopol's Central District Court against E. Seitov, who was punished on 8 May. Three other cases have been heard in Simferopol District Court, an official of the court chancellery told Forum 18 on 16 June. Akim Islamov was fined 2,000 Russian Roubles on 7 May. Sabri Aslanov was fined 1,000 Russian Roubles on 8 May. Rifat Osmanov was fined 1,000 Russian Roubles on 9 June. Forum 18 was unable to find out if the fines were imposed for religious literature, or for other literature on the Federal List promoting racism, violence or xenophobia.

Eighth fine for outdoor religious event

Seven of nine Council of Churches Baptists from Saki who conducted an outdoor religious meeting in the village of Maryanovka in Krasnogvardeiskoe District of central Crimea on

10 May were fined later that month. District Police detained "and subjected them to protracted interrogation", fellow Baptists complained. "Then records of an offence were drawn up against them, they were fingerprinted and photographed, and their vehicle, literature and equipment were examined."

The seven were found guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 20.2. This punishes "violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket". The leader, Sergey Shokha, was fined 20,000 Russian Roubles. The others were each fined 10,000 Russian Roubles (see F18News 2 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2068).

The case under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 5 against the eighth of the Baptists, Kristina Matafonova, was finally heard on 24 June at Krasnogvardeiskoe District Court after several postponements. Judge Irina Shevchenko similarly fined her 10,000 Russian Roubles (3,900 Ukrainian Hryvnias, 1,400 Norwegian Kroner, 165 Euros or 185 US Dollars). This is about three weeks' average local wage, according to Crimean residents.

"As with the other trials, our church members were there today in court to support Kristina," a church member told Forum 18 from Saki the same day. Judge Shevchenko's assistant confirmed to Forum 18 during the trial that fellow church members were present.

The other seven of the Baptists – Shokha, as well as Anatoly Gerasimenko, Semyon Vinnikov, his brother Denis Vinnikov, Mark Dombrovsky, Yelena Kuskova and Galina Romanovich – all appealed against their fines to Crimea's Supreme Court.

However, on 22 June, Gerasimenko's appeal at the Supreme Court was postponed until 6 July, as were the following day the appeals of Dombrovsky to 7 July and of Denis Vinnikov to 9 July, Baptists told Forum 18. "The judges said they wanted to invite the police to the appeal hearings to justify their accusations," a fellow church member told Forum 18 from Saki.

Four other church members' Supreme Court appeals have also been scheduled: Romanovich's on 30 June; Shokha's and Semyon Vinnikov's on 1 July; and Kuskova's on 7 July.

Proposed "religious agitation" offence dropped

Meanwhile, a proposed "offence" of "religious agitation in public places" has now been abandoned. The proposed "offence" – to be punished by small fines - had been included in the draft Law on Administrative Offences in the Republic of Crimea approved in its first reading in Crimea's parliament, the State Council, on 20 May (see F18News 3 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2069).

However, following its first reading, State Council Deputy Viktor Shapovalenko proposed that the "offence" of "religious agitation" be deleted from the original Article 24, Part 2 (renumbered to Article 7.2, Part 2). His proposal was approved by the State Council's Legislative Committee on 16 June, according to the State Council website. The law was approved in the second reading the following day.

The State Council is still considering a proposed Crimean Religion Law (see F18News 3 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2069).

Discussion of the draft was on the agenda of the 16 June Culture Committee meeting. The draft was not presented to the State Council session on 17 June, the last one before

its summer break. The State Council website notes that the proposed Law "is under consideration by State Council Committees".

Ukrainians in Crimea suffer discrimination

Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Kiev Patriarchate Archbishop in Crimea urges world leaders and community to protect rights and freedom of Ukrainians of the Peninsula

RISU (08.06.2015)

http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/ukraine_and_world/international_relations/ -

Archbishop of Simferopol and Crimea Kliment (Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Kiev Patriarchate), on behalf of the religious community and of the Ukrainian community in Crimea, publicly appealed to the international community to urgently do everything possible to help Ukrainians in Crimea and to protect their national and religious rights and prevent forcible eviction of Ukrainians from their native land and their assimilation.

The bishop's appeal was sent to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, President Poroshenko, Putin, US President Barack Obama, French President Francois Hollande, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and the representation of the European Union in Ukraine.

Bishop Kliment enumerated incidents of seizures of the in honor of the Holy Martyr Kliment in the city of Sevastopol and the church in honor of Andrew the First-Called in the village of Perevalnoe, and the arson of the country home of the ruling bishop in the village of Mramornoe of Simferopol district, the closing of parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Kiev Patriarchate in the cities of Saki, Krasnoperekopsk, and Kerch, and the raiders' seizure of premises of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Kiev Patriarchate in Simferopol.

The bishop considers to be impermissible:

--persecution of Crimeans for their religious affiliation;

--seizure of premises of the Crimean diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate;

--persecution of activists of the movement Evromaidan-Crimea, who defended their position in a peaceful manner, organizing peaceful demonstrations in support of the European choice of Ukrainians;

--persecution of Ukrainians of Crimea, who remain citizens of Ukraine and are bearers of the Ukrainian culture and language;

--closing of classes taught in the Ukrainian language and destruction of the Ukrainian preparatory school in Simferopol and seven other Ukrainian-speaking schools located on the territory of the peninsula;

--destruction of Ukrainian language publications and the newspaper Krymskaia Svetlitsa, whose premises local authorities confiscated;

--reduction in the Crimean informational space of the number of television and radio programs in the Ukrainian language;

--renaming of Ukrainian institutions: houses, theaters, libraries, and schools;

--prohibition of the conduct of peaceful demonstration and meetings at monuments for Ukrainians, particular around the monument to Taras Shevchenko in the city of Simferopol on the anniversary of his birth;

--arrest of Ukrainians in cities and villages of Crimea who dress in national clothing.

Vladyka Kliment urged the United Nations Organization, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and states of the European Union to take decisive measures for protecting basic principles of human rights and liberties in Crimea.

"I consider it urgent and appropriate today to resolve the question on the international level about the immediate introduction of an international mission for monitoring human rights and discrimination against ethnic communities on the Crimean peninsula. I ask you to consider at the level of international negotiations questions of the guarantee of the rights and liberties of Crimean Ukrainians and questions of the functioning of the Crimean diocese of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev patriarchate on the peninsula of Crimea," the appeal says. (tr. by PDS, posted 9 June 2015)

New punishments for "religious agitation in public places"?

Forum 18 (03.06.2015) - A new draft Law which includes punishments for the undefined "offence" of "religious agitation in public places" was approved in May in first reading in Crimea's parliament, the State Council. Although fines would be relatively small, they would rise for repeated "offences", Forum 18 News Service notes. No deputy or State Council official has been able to explain how this provision might be used if eventually adopted. Meanwhile, a senior Crimean Muslim official was twice fined in April for failing to pay earlier fines because institutions under his authority had religious books the Russian authorities claim are "extremist".

The Crimean authorities already punish those who exercise their freedom of religion or belief in public. Nine Baptists were interrogated, photographed, fingerprinted and seven of them fined in May for sharing their faith in public in a village in central Crimea. Five have already lodged appeals with Crimea's Supreme Court (see F18News 2 June 2015http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2068).

New proposed fines

The proposed new fines to punish individuals for "religious agitation in public places" were included in a draft Law on Administrative Offences in the Republic of Crimea. Article 24, Part 2 of the current draft declares: "Fortune-telling, begging and religious agitation in public places are liable to a warning or imposition of an administrative fine of 100 to 1,000 Roubles." A fine of 100 to 500 Russian Roubles would be imposed under Part 1 on those "pestering citizens" in public places (it remains unclear if this would punish those sharing their faith). Part 3 of the same Article would impose a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 Russian Roubles for repeat "offenders" under both these Parts.

Each 1,000 Russian Roubles is equivalent to 400 Ukrainian Hryvnias, 150 Norwegian Kroner, 17 Euros, or 19 US Dollars.

The draft Law was officially submitted by five deputies of the State Council, including the speaker Vladimir Konstantinov and one of the deputy speakers Konstantin Bakharev.

However, officials of the State Council's Legislative Committee told Forum 18 that Committee Chair (and another of the five deputies), Yefim Fiks, wrote the text.

Deputies approved the draft in first reading on 20 May, according to the State Council website. Konstantinov noted during the session that the Legislative Committee will have to undertake "serious revision" of the draft before its second reading. The website does not say if he indicated any changes he would like made to Article 24. Officials at the Legislative Committee told Forum 18 each time it phoned on 2 and 3 June that no-one was available to discuss the draft Law. They also declined to say when the second hearing is likely to be held. The telephones of Fiks, Konstantinov and Bakharev went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 2 and 3 June.

Galina Merkulova, head of the State Council's Legal Expertise Department, told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 3 June that she had conducted a review of the draft Law before it received its first reading, However, she refused to discuss the meaning of the term "religious agitation in public places" and what specific activities would be punished if the draft Law is adopted in its current form.

Svetlana Savchenko, Chair of the State Council's Culture Committee, stressed that the draft Law was being handled not by her Committee. But she told Forum 18 on 3 June that "I don't understand what they envisage" by the term "religious agitation in public places". Asked if, for example, Orthodox Easter processions around churches might be punishable under this provision, she responded: "Processions are not agitation – giving out books or leaflets is."

Two fines for not paying fines

Meanwhile, the deputy head of Crimea's Muftiate, Esadullakh (Ruslan) Bairov, was fined twice on 8 April for failing to pay two of the three fines imposed in 2014 to punish him for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, according to the court decisions seen by Forum 18. The two new fines total between 7,000 and 10,000 Russian Roubles. The decisions in both cases note that he admitted his guilt.

In separate hearings one after the other, Judge Vladimir Gotskalyuk of Simferopol's Zheleznodorozhny District Court found Bairov guilty and fined him under Administrative Code Article 20.25, Part 1. This punishes "failure to pay an administrative fine in the period specified by the current Code" with a fine of double the previous fine (with a 1,000 Russian Rouble minimum), up to 15 days' imprisonment or up to 50 hours' community service. Bairov did not appeal against these new fines.

Bairov was fined three times in autumn 2014, each time under Administrative Code Article 20.29. This punishes "Production or distribution of extremist materials" recorded on the Federal List of Extremist Materials with, for individuals, a fine or imprisonment of up to 15 days and confiscation of the banned literature. For organisations, punishments are a fine of 50,000 to 100,000 Russian Roubles or suspension of an organisation's activity for 90 days, as well as confiscation (100,000 Russian Roubles is about 38,600 Ukrainian Hryvnias, 14,300 Norwegian Kroner, 1,650 Euros or 1,850 US Dollars).

Bairov was first fined 2,000 Russian Roubles on 26 August 2014 by Dzhankoi District Court after religious books were seized during a raid on a madrassah (Islamic religious school) which he oversees. The Court also ordered the books confiscated.

He was then fined 1,500 Russian Roubles by Simferopol's Kiev District Court on 28 August 2014. He was punished in his capacity as director of Terciman Muslim bookshop in Simferopol, which had been raided the previous month. Officials found several copies of two books which have been banned under Russian "extremism" legislation. The Court also ordered the books confiscated.

His third fine of 3,000 Russian Roubles was handed down by Kirovskoe District Court on 10 September 2014 (see F18News 29 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010).

After Bairov failed to pay the 2014 fines, the cases were handed to court bailiffs.

"Extremist" literature purged from libraries

The fines on Bairov were among many imposed after Police and other security agencies raided homes, madrassahs, mosques, bookshops, libraries and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls as they hunted for religious literature which has been declared "extremist" in Russia and placed on the Justice Ministry's Federal List.

Numerous Muslim and Jehovah's Witness works are on Russia's Federal List, as well as several Falun Gong and one Catholic publication (see F18News 20 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2049).

However, prosecutors were not always successful. Of 13 known attempted prosecutions of individuals in Crimea under Administrative Code Article 20.29 for religious literature, nine ended in fines. Of three attempted prosecutions of religious communities (all of them Jehovah's Witness communities), all three failed. Three of the individuals prosecuted were librarians, and a fourth was a teacher in charge of a school library (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Crimea http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Crimea's Culture Minister Alina Novoselskaya announced on 28 May that all "extremist" literature has now been removed from all of Crimea's libraries. "With the aim of preventing instances of the distribution of literature of an extremist or terrorist nature, Crimea's Culture Ministry has conducted work to remove from library stocks publications included on the Federal List of Extremist Materials," the pro-Russian Kryminform news agency quoted her the same day as telling a conference in Yalta.

Novoselskaya added that access to "extremist" websites has been blocked in libraries in educational institutions and elsewhere.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out how much of the removed "extremist" literature was religious and whether it was then put in storage, thrown away or destroyed. Neither Novoselskaya nor Deputy Minister Tatyana Manezhina (who has responsibility for this issue in the Ministry) was available when Forum 18 called on 3 June. Vera Kovalenko, who is responsible for libraries in the Ministry, refused to discuss anything with Forum 18 on 3 June.

New draft Crimean Religion Law

On 26 May, the State Council's Culture Committee formally presented to the State Council's other Committees a draft Crimean Religion Law. The text of the draft Law, as well as the Explanatory Note setting out why the Committee believes it is needed, were posted on the State Council website the following day. Committee Chair Savchenko prepared the draft, based on comments from a Working Group established in December 2014. "The draft is currently being discussed in the State Council's Committees," she told Forum 18 on 3 June.

Article 2 of the draft Law defines a "traditional religion" as "a religion having a formative cultural significance for historical communities". It defines "totalitarian sect or destructive cult" as "an organisation using a complex of special techniques (control of consciousness) with the aim of subjugating the will of an individual and controlling the feelings and

conduct, bringing harm to the individual and society". However, these terms are not used in the rest of the draft Law.

Article 7 of the draft, which covers state registration of religious organisations, would ban the formation of religious organisations "on an ethnic basis within confessions or religious movements". It remains unclear if this would outlaw the Orthodox Church from calling itself Ukrainian or Russian, or how it might affect Crimea's Jewish community.

The same Article would also ban the functioning of "centralised religious organisations" which do not have state registration, a legal impossibility as Russia's Religion Law gives this designation only to religious organisations which function in more than one Region of the country and are registered by Russia's Justice Ministry in Moscow. It would also ban the formation by a registered centralised religious organisation of branches or institutions in Crimea which do not themselves have state registration.

"In line with Russian law"?

Asked why such bans are imposed in the draft Law, Savchenko explained that this was the text as formulated by the Working Group. "These provisions are all in line with Russian law," she told Forum 18. "In any case, all these points are open to discussion. Any deputy or organisation can submit proposals."

Asked why the draft Law defines "traditional religion" and "totalitarian sect or destructive cult", even if these terms are not subsequently used in the text, Savchenko responded: "Unfortunately Crimea has experience of such groups in the 1990s, such as the White Brotherhood."

Merkulova of the State Council's Legal Expertise Department refused to tell Forum 18 if she had also reviewed the draft Religion Law.

"National security threats", "conducting ideological work"

The Explanatory Note accompanying the draft Law laments what it regards as the diminution of state control over religion from 2009 when the peninsula was under Ukrainian rule, including the abolition of research posts. "Also liquidated was the post in [Crimea's] health centre of doctor/psychiatrist, who specialised in studying the influence of radical sects on the health of individuals," it laments.

Such reductions in state capacity to control religion came amid growing "threats to national security" from "various non-traditional, radical and esoteric organisations", the Explanatory Note warns. Among such groups it names the Muslim missionary movement Tabligh Jamaat, the Nurdzhular movement (Muslims who follow the works of the late Turkish theologian Said Nursi, though adherents deny any formal movement exists), and the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong. It also mentions "modernising groups" within "traditional religions".

Tabligh Jamaat and Nurdzhular have both been banned in Russia as "extremist" (see Forum 18's "Extremism" Russia religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724).

The Explanatory Note also warns of a "growing interest in Crimea on a geopolitical level from abroad". It claims that since 2000, between 150 and 600 foreign missionaries have visited Crimea annually. Under Ukrainian government pressure, it alleges, "Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – headquarters USA) were given wide possibility of inviting foreign missionaries and conducting ideological work".

The Explanatory Note highlights what it sees as the need to reform the current Religious

and Ethnic Cultural Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry, which has five staff. It calls for a separate Religious Department to be formed with more staff.

Earlier draft Law rejected

Officials have long spoken of adopting a Crimean Religion Law, though without explaining why this is needed. A proposed law "on freedom of conscience, religious associations and the prevention of religious extremism", made public in October 2014, would have imposed restrictions on "missionary activity", allowing only "missionaries" approved by registered religious organisations and using literature published by named registered religious organisations.

However, State Council deputies rejected the draft law on its first reading in December 2014 and sent it back. Deputies argued that regulating religious organisations and preventing extremism should be handled in separate laws. The State Council's Culture Committee formed a nine-member Working Group to produce a new draft by 15 April 2015 (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Crimea http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Law on religion prepared for Crimea

Annexed Crimea plans to adopt law against "totalitarian sects" and "destructive cults"

Religiia v Ukraine (03.06.2015) - The draft of a republican law on freedom of conscience and religious associations has been introduced into the state council of Crimea, which was annexed by Russia. It is supposed to expand the authority of the state in this sphere. The text of the document was published on the website of the state council, Religiia v Ukraine reports citing RIA FederalPress.

The explanatory note says that in the last years of Ukrainian rule, "the system of state-confessional relations in the republic of Crimea was methodically destroyed." It cites the examples of the liquidation of the Committee on Religious Affairs and the position of psychiatric physician specializing in sectarians. As a result, Crimea was visited by numerous missionaries from abroad, particularly Mormon missionaries. The author of the draft law, the chairman of the state council Committee on Culture, Svetlana Savchenko, thinks that this was "a manifestation of geopolitical interest."

As a way out of the situation, Savchenko and her colleagues propose to create within the republican Ministry of Culture a Department for Religious Affairs (there now exists there only a department that simultaneously deals with national cultural associations). In particular, the organizations will be required to inform this body about the arrival of foreign preachers. Other powers of the department are rather vaguely defined ("forecasting the development of the religious situation," "facilitating the strengthening of mutual understanding and toleration," and so forth).

The draft of the law contains definitions of traditional religion ("a religion having formative cultural significance for the historical community") and a totalitarian sect, also called a destructive cult ("an organization that uses a complex of special techniques (mind control) with the goal of suppressing the will of an individual and controlling feelings and conduct, causing harm to the individual and society"). However, these terms are not used a single time in the main text of the document. The explanatory note speaks about "radical and esoteric" sects.

It is known that the head of Crimea, Sergei Aksenov, back in the fall introduced into the state council a draft of a law "On freedom of conscience, religious associations, and manifestations of religious extremism," but it was quickly withdrawn. Some of the provisions, (for example, a prohibition of national religious organizations) made it into the new draft and some did not. Thus, Aksenov's draft suggested banning the distribution of religious literature without an indication of the organization publishing it and the opening of night clubs near houses of worship, as well as requiring missionaries to have special licenses.

Recently the state council adopted on first reading the draft of a law on administrative violations of law. It subjected to a fine, in particular, street preachers and prognosticators. (tr. by PDS, posted 3 June 2015)

Interrogated, photographed, fingerprinted, fined

Forum 18 (02.06.2015) - Nine Baptists were interrogated, photographed, fingerprinted and seven of them fined in May for sharing their faith in public in a village in central Crimea, Forum 18 News Service notes. The chair of the village council who halted the event and the head of the District Police both refused to discuss their actions with Forum 18.

The punishments came as Crimea's State Council (parliament) approved in first reading a draft Law on Administrative Offences in the Republic of Crimea which would – if adopted in current form - punish "religious agitation in public places" with a warning or a fine. Also, a new draft Crimean Religion Law has now been presented to the State Council's committees (see F18News 3 June 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2069).

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, some religious communities have complained of state restrictions on public activities they had previously conducted when the peninsula was under Ukrainian rule. However, most have declined to give details of such restrictions for fear of making their situation worse (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Crimea http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Meanwhile, state re-registration of religious communities is proceeding only very slowly, Forum 18 notes. Only 54 are so far listed on the Russian Justice Ministry website as re-registered, though others appear to have received re-registration and are awaiting listing on the site. The re-registration deadline has been extended to 1 January 2016. The United Nations has criticised the consequences of the re-registration obligation (see below).

Preaching halted, interrogation, fingerprinting

Nine members of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the coastal town of Saki travelled 85 kms (55 miles) inland to the village of Maryanovka in Krasnogvardeiskoe District of central Crimea on 10 May to pass on Easter greetings and preach to local people, Baptists told Forum 18. That afternoon they sang hymns and spoke in the yard of multi-storey flats. "People began to come up to them, and those that wanted to stayed to listen," Baptists recounted. "After a little time the chair of the village council, Aleksei Rusanov, arrived and demanded to halt the event."

Rusanov's written statement of how he halted the event was presented in subsequent court cases, according to the court decisions seen by Forum 18.

Rusanov repeatedly refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 27 May why he had ordered the Baptists to halt their activity. "Goodbye," he said each time and put the phone down.

Baptists say the church members ended their event within 15 minutes and set off for home. However, a police officer stopped them as they were driving home. He took all nine church members to the District Police "and subjected them to protracted interrogation", fellow Baptists complained. "Then records of an offence were drawn up against them, they were fingerprinted and photographed, and their vehicle, literature and equipment were examined." They were handed summonses to court and freed shortly before 2 am.

A case was prepared against Sergey Shokha under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 2. This punishes "violation of the established procedure for organising or conducting a gathering, meeting, demonstration, procession or picket". Part 2 specifically targets the holding of events without formally notifying the authorities in advance. For individuals, this carries a fine of 20,000 to 30,000 Roubles, compulsory labour of up to forty hours, or detention for up to ten days. Officials may be fined 20,000 to 40,000 Roubles, and organisations 70,000 to 100,000 Roubles.

Each 10,000 Russian Roubles is equivalent to 4,000 Ukrainian Hryvnias, 1,500 Norwegian Kroner, 170 Euros, or 190 US Dollars.

Cases were also prepared against seven of the other eight – Anatoly Gerasimenko, Semyon Vinnikov, his brother Denis Vinnikov, Mark Dombrovsky, Yelena Kuskova, Galina Romanovich and Kristina Matafonova – under Administrative Code Article 20.2, Part 5. This punishes participants in illegal public events with a fine of 10,000 to 20,000 Roubles or compulsory labour for up to forty hours.

Krasnogvardeiskoe District Police Chief, Colonel Aleksandr Venikov, refused absolutely to answer Forum 18's questions as to why his officers arrested, interrogated, fingerprinted and photographed the nine Baptists and prepared the cases against them. "I won't give any information by telephone," he repeatedly told Forum 18 on 2 June. "I don't know who you are." He then put the phone down.

Fines

On 19 May, Judge Irina Shevchenko of Krasnogvardeiskoe District Court found Shokha, Gerasimenko, both Vinnikov brothers, Dombrovsky and Kuskova guilty, according to the court decisions seen by Forum 18. She fined Shokha 20,000 Russian Roubles. She fined the other five 10,000 Russian Roubles each.

On 20 May, Judge Shevchenko found Romanovich guilty and fined her 10,000 Russian Roubles also.

That same day, Judge Shevchenko had also been due to hear the case against Matafonova, but this was postponed until the afternoon of 15 June, according to court records.

Five of the seven fined Baptists have already lodged appeals to Crimea's Supreme Court, according to court records.

"This event did not disturb public order"

The church members were punished for "holding a public event devoted to the mass Easter greeting to citizens.. without informing the local authorities", the court decisions noted. The court argued that this violated Article 16, Part 5 of the 1997 Religion Law

(which classifies certain public religious events as falling under the procedure for demonstrations) and Articles 4 and 7 of the 2004 Demonstrations Law (which set out requirements for the authorities to be notified in advance of the aim, location, date, duration and number of expected participants of public events).

The church members denied this in court. Semyon Vinnikov, for example, explained that "the Easter greeting they had held did not constitute a public event, gathering, meeting, procession, or a demonstration" under the terms of the Demonstrations Law.

"This event did not disturb public order and did not threaten the safety of the participants themselves or of other citizens," church members insist, "and therefore did not require the taking of special measures." They point out the guarantee of freedom of conscience and religion "including the right individually or with others" to profess a faith, as well as to spread one's religious convictions in Article 28 of Russia's Constitution.

Prosecutions are often brought in Russia to punish organisers of public religious events despite a December 2012 Constitutional Court ruling that such organisers need not necessarily seek advance state permission to hold them (see F18News 3 January 2013 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1787).

October 2014 changes to Article 16 of the Religion Law specify that the Demonstrations Law applies to public religious events "which require the adoption of measures to ensure public order and the security of the participants of religious rites and ceremonies, as well as those of other citizens" (see F18News 2 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2044).

Slow re-registration

Crimea's Justice Department and the Justice Ministry in Moscow have been slow to process re-registration applications from religious communities which had state registration in Ukraine and wished to maintain it under Russian rule.

Of the 1,546 religious communities which had Ukrainian state registration (1,409 in the then Crimean Autonomous Republic and 137 in administratively separate Sevastopol), only about 170 have so far applied for re-registration (see F18News 26 March 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2050).

The re-registration deadline was originally set for 31 December 2014. However, a law was hurriedly adopted in late December 2014 extending the deadline until 1 March 2015 (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Crimea http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

On 26 March, a provision was added to existing proposed amendments to Russia's Religion Law and several other laws to extend the deadline again until 1 January 2016. The amendments were approved by both chambers of the Russian parliament and, on 6 April, signed into law by President Vladimir Putin.

As of 29 May, the most recent update, the Justice Ministry website listed 42 local religious organisations in Crimea which have succeeded in gaining re-registration. In addition, ten are listed in the administratively separate city of Sevastopol. The Russian Orthodox Diocese of Simferopol (one of three of the Church's dioceses on the peninsula) and the Crimean Muftiate are listed as centralised religious organisations. No other centralised religious organisations appear to be listed.

"After many months of preparatory work", Crimea's Justice Department finally gave re-registration in early May to all 22 Jehovah's Witness communities which applied for it, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 on 15 May. Only one – in Sevastopol – was included

as of 29 May in the listing on the Justice Ministry website. A further 84 Jehovah's Witness communities function in Crimea without state registration.

Prosecutors unsuccessfully tried to prosecute three Jehovah's Witness communities for allegedly having "extremist" literature. A Simferopol court sent the case against their community back in November 2014. A Dzhankoi court dismissed cases against both their local communities in January, and the prosecutors' appeal failed in March (see Forum 18's religious freedom survey of Crimea http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

The two Dzhankoi communities and the Simferopol community were among the 22 which gained re-registration.

The telephone of Irina Demetskaya, head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Department in Simferopol, went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 2 June.

United Nations concern

In a report on the human rights situation in Ukraine covering 16 February to 15 May, published on 1 June, the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) expressed concern about the consequences of the re-registration requirement on Crimea's religious communities (<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/10thOHCHRreportUkraine.pdf>).

"The HRMMU notes with concern that the obligation of religious communities to re-register under Russian Federation law, the strict requirements of the procedure, and the lengthy verifications it entails, have adversely affected the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of hundreds of thousands of Crimean residents. Without registration, religious communities can congregate but cannot enter into contracts to rent state owned property, employ people or invite foreigners."

The UN HRMMU calls on the Crimean and Russian authorities to "End the practice of imposing cumbersome re-registration requirements in Crimea, which have been applied mainly to the media and religious organizations and limited the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion."

Registration of religious publication

In addition to re-registering communities, printed religious publications with a circulation of more than 1,000 copies – whether produced by an individual, a registered or unregistered community – also require registration under Russian law.

The Muftiate's Crimean-Tatar language monthly journal "Hidayat" (Guidance) and the bi-monthly "Istochnik Mudrosti" (Source of Wisdom), which is in both Crimean Tatar and Russian, were both re-registered on 24 March, Roskomnadzor state agency notes on its website. Also re-registered the same day was "Tavrida Pravoslavnaya" (Orthodox Tavrida), the paper of the Simferopol Russian Orthodox Diocese.

Under Russia's much-revised 1991 Media Law, all printed publications with a print-run of more than 1,000 copies on any subject require registration with Roskomnadzor. Websites do not require state registration.

Administrative Code Article 13.21, Part 1 prescribes fines and confiscations for those who publish media without appropriate registration. Fines on individuals are 1,000 to 1,500 Russian Roubles, on officials 2,000 to 3,000 Russian Roubles, and on organisations 20,000 to 30,000 Russian Roubles.

Forum 18 asked Roskomnadzor's Crimean branch in writing on 1 June whether it has rejected the registration applications of any religious publications. No response was received by the end of the working day in Crimea on 2 June.

Europe's 'unlikely Bible belt' officially disappears

Christianity Today (15.04.2015) - There were 1,546 official religious groups in Crimea when citizens of that region voted overwhelmingly last year to leave Ukraine and join Russia.

Today only about 14 remain, according to the religious liberty watchdog group Forum 18.

Under rules imposed last fall, all Crimean religious groups had to re-register with Russian authorities.

According to Forum 18, this included requiring their leaders to become Russian citizens, to join an existing centralized religious organization, or in some cases to pass a state religion expertise text.

Without registration, even simple day-to-day tasks have become difficult.

"Without registration under Russian law, religious communities can meet for religious purposes," according to Forum 18. "However, they cannot enjoy the rights that legal entities have, including to enter into contracts to rent property, employ people or invite foreigners for religious activity."

Around two million people live in Crimea, where the majority of the population belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Evangelicals, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and other faith groups have all been restricted by the new laws, according to Foreign Affairs. Without registration, several expat Catholic priests and nuns have already been forced to leave the country.

Members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom painted a bleak picture for religious groups in Crimea in a recent Foreign Affairs op-ed:

In March of last year, Reform Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin of Simferopol was forced to leave Crimea after denouncing Russian actions. His synagogue had been defaced by a swastika and, a month later, vandals defaced Sevastopol's monument to 4,200 Jews killed by the Nazis in July 1942.

And even Christian churches and leaders who are not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate have come under increasing pressure, facing abuse and violence. Last June, the leader of the Salvation Army in Crimea, left the peninsula after reporting repeated harassment by security agents. By late 2014, clergy without Russian citizenship, particularly Greek and Roman Catholics and those belonging to the Kiev Patriarchate, were compelled to leave Crimea, and the home of the Kiev Patriarchate's Bishop of Simferopol and Crimea, Klyment Kushch, was burned down.

Religious liberty watchdog groups and persecuted church advocates worry Crimea is only the beginning. They fear parts of Ukraine controlled by rebels allied with Russia will also impose restrictions on religious groups.

"The picture in the Crimea under Russian annexation paints a disturbing picture of the future for Christians in Russian-controlled territories," said Paul Robinson, chief executive of Release International.

Protestants were surprisingly successful in Ukraine after the end of the Cold War, making it "Europe's unlikely Bible Belt," as the online business publication Quartz put it.

"But since Russian Orthodoxy is the predominant faith in Ukraine's separatist eastern regions," Quartz reported recently, "it's unsurprising that pro-Russian separatists view Protestantism as a kind of existential threat."

A Vice correspondent recently reported on Protestants in Ukraine who lost access to their churches after the buildings were taken over by separatists.

Andrei Purgin, a high-ranking official in the Donetsk People's Republic, a Ukrainian rebel group with ties to Russia, denied that the Protestant church takeover was official policy and told Vice that his group "was against this."

Purgin told Vice said that Ukraine guarantees freedom of religion, but rebels want to ensure a central role for the Orthodox Church.

"Orthodoxy is one of the foundations of our statehood but at the same time, we are not trying to violate anyone's rights," he told Vice.

CT has covered the recent conflict in Ukraine, including how the country's acting president, Oleksandr Turchynov, is a former Baptist pastor, and how Russia blocked Americans from adopting children from Crimea. CT featured the clergy who took a literal stand in Ukraine's protests, and how they held an all-night prayer vigil, hoping to prevent Russia's invasion. CT also offered a 160-year Christian history behind the Ukrainian conflict and the Crimean Peninsula.

Only one percent of religious organisations re-registered

Forum 18 (23.03.2015) - Weeks after the 1 March extended deadline expired for the compulsory re-registration under Russian law of Crimea's 1,546 religious communities which had state registration with the Ukrainian authorities, only 14 have received it, according to Russia's Justice Ministry. A further two have been re-registered but are awaiting approval from the tax authorities. Of the rest, only about 150 other applications are currently being considered locally, Irina Demetskaya, head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Department in Simferopol, told Forum 18 News Service from the Crimean capital on 18 March. A further 13 are being reviewed by the Justice Ministry in Moscow.

This means that only about one percent of religious communities which had legal status under Ukrainian law now have it under Russian law. Forum 18 also notes that so far, just over a tenth of religious communities which had registration under Ukrainian law have applied for the compulsory re-registration under Russian law since Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

Without registration under Russian law, religious communities can meet for religious purposes. However, they cannot enjoy the rights that legal entities have, including to enter into contracts to rent property, employ people or invite foreigners for religious activity.

The re-registration deadline was originally set for 31 December 2014. However, a law was hurriedly adopted in late December 2014 extending the deadline until 1 March 2015 (see F18News 20 January 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2028).

While many religious communities are awaiting state registration under Russian law, they cannot invite foreign citizens. Turkish imams and Catholic priests and nuns were forced to leave Crimea (see F18News 20 January 2015 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2028).

Religious communities awaiting re-registration have also had rental contracts for state-owned premises abruptly terminated (see Forum 18's Crimea religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Tight restrictions

The forced imposition of Russian restrictions on religion in Crimea since March 2014 has brought other difficulties for those trying to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief, Forum 18 notes. In addition to expulsions of invited foreign religious leaders and unilateral cancellation of rental contracts, these include: raids, fines, government surveillance and obstructions to regaining places of worship confiscated in the Soviet period (see Forum 18's Crimea religious freedom survey http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2051).

Only 14 re-registrations

The Justice Ministry in Moscow has re-registered two centralised religious organisations: the Russian Orthodox Simferopol and Crimea Diocese (on 23 December 2014), and the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol or Muftiate (on 16 February 2015). These needed to be registered in Moscow as they function in more than one administrative region (Sevastopol is administratively separate from the Republic of Crimea). The Muftiate received its registration certificate on 27 February.

In addition, the Justice Ministry website lists the 12 local religious communities re-registered by the Justice Department in Crimea as of 23 March. Nine of them were re-registered in late January, and three in February. Three are Jewish communities and the rest various Protestant communities.

As of 23 March, the Justice Ministry website lists no religious communities re-registered in the administratively separate city of Sevastopol.

Effort and expense

The registration documents list the extensive range of documents religious communities wanting re-registration were required to submit. These included: each organisation's statute, two records of community meetings, and an official instruction, as well as a list of all the community members, a notarised copy, information on the "bases of the religious belief", and a letter of guarantee.

Religious communities have complained to the Crimean Human Rights Field Mission, a joint initiative of Russian and Ukrainian human rights defenders, of the effort and the expense of assembling all this documentation for re-registration applications.

Aleksandr Selevko, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry in Simferopol, admits that the re-registration process has been chaotic and difficult for

many religious communities. "We wrote several times to the Council of Ministers asking for a solution to these problems," he told Forum 18 on 25 March.

However, Lyudmila Lubina, Crimea's government-appointed human rights Ombudsperson, said that no religious community had complained to her about any difficulties over re-registration. "I admit that the re-registration procedure is much more difficult than in Ukraine," she told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 10 March. "It's the same whether it's a religious or commercial organisation."

150 initial rejections

About 150 re-registration applications were refused in the months up to the original re-registration deadline of the end of 2014, Demetskaya admitted to Forum 18. "The first sets of documents were very bad," she claimed, without specifying what had been wrong with them. "They were all corrected and resubmitted."

Among those initially returned were all twenty Jehovah's Witness applications, she said.

Also among those rejected the first time were the applications from the Catholic Church, whose Crimean parishes are part of the Odessa and Simferopol Diocese. They were rejected because some of the documentation was in Ukrainian. The Church resubmitted the amended applications to the Justice Ministry in Moscow on 21 January 2015, Bishop Jacek Pyl, assistant bishop of Odessa and Simferopol, told Polish Radio the same day.

13 under "expert analysis" in Moscow

A total of 13 religious communities have had their applications sent to Moscow for "expert analysis" by the Justice Ministry, Demetskaya told Forum 18. Nine are Catholic, two are Karaite, one is Augsburg Lutheran and one is Baptist. "The Ministry has to verify that they are religious organisations," she explained.

The Justice Ministry has six months to complete such "expert analyses", though Demetskaya said she expected them to be completed more quickly.

Enforced adaptations

Several religious communities have had to restructure themselves in the hope of being able to gain re-registration under Russian law, Forum 18 notes.

While the three Russian Orthodox dioceses have remained part of the Kiev-based Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, many Protestant congregations have voluntarily or involuntarily abandoned Ukrainian-based oversight bodies to join Russian structures. On 14 December 2014, representatives of Seventh-day Adventist congregations met in Simferopol to create a new Crimean Mission, separate from Church structures in Ukraine.

Only negotiations between the Holy See's Secretariat of State and the Russian Federation's representation to the Holy See allowed the Catholic Church to agree a new structure that the Catholics hoped would allow their parishes in Crimea to be able to gain re-registration. On 22 December 2014 a new Pastoral District of Crimea and Sevastopol was created within the Odessa and Simferopol Diocese "exclusively for administrative purposes". The Vatican appointed Bishop Pyl as Delegate of the new District, he told the German Catholic news agency KNA on 29 January 2015.

However, the Pastoral District was refused registration as a centralised religious organisation in December 2014. Officials told the Catholics they would have to register three parishes first before they could then officially form a centralised organisation which could apply for state registration, Bishop Pyl noted.

Eleven percent application rate

Demetskaya of the Justice Department put the total number of applications at about 320, though this includes the approximately 150 applications initially rejected twice. This means that in all, only about 170 religious communities applied for re-registration, about 11 percent of the total registered under Ukrainian law.

As of 1 January 2014, Ukraine's Culture Ministry noted that 1,409 religious communities in the then Crimean Autonomous Republic had state registration. Of these, 602 were Orthodox, 410 Muslim, 283 Protestant, 22 Catholic, 13 Jewish, and 79 others. A further 674 communities (the vast majority of them belonging to the Muftiate) functioned without registration.

In addition, the Ukrainian Culture Ministry noted that 137 religious communities in Sevastopol (an administratively separate city) had state registration. Of these, 73 were Orthodox, 37 Protestant, 8 Muslim, 4 Catholic, 2 Jewish, and 13 others. The Ministry recorded no unregistered communities in the city.

"I can't force communities to bring their documents," Demetskaya insisted to Forum 18. "But those that were lodged are all being considered. None have been refused."

Among those that did not lodge re-registration applications are communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Kiev Patriarchate, she noted. Archbishop Kliment (Kushch), head of the Kiev Patriarchate's Simferopol and Crimea Diocese, told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 25 March that documents for the eight remaining parishes in Crimea are still being prepared.

"Automatically no longer regarded as a legal entity"

Demetskaya of the Justice Department stressed that any religious community that failed to lodge applications by the extended 1 March 2015 deadline "is automatically no longer regarded as a legal entity". She said she did not know what the tax authorities would do with such communities. She said that if any questions arise over the ownership of places of worship or other property, such communities will be able to assert their ownership through the courts. "Questions on property are not for me," she told Forum 18.

Asked whether religious communities which do not want to register or re-register can still function, Demetskaya initially pointed out that "religious groups" – with fewer than ten adult members – are not required to register under Russian law. Asked what would happen to larger communities continuing to function without registration, she eventually conceded to Forum 18 that they could continue with property owned by private individuals.

Religious affairs official Selevko also confirmed to Forum 18 that religious communities which do not get re-registration or do not apply for it can still function without legal status. "There will be no persecution of them," he insisted. "They can conduct services, but they can't rent premises."

All mosques under Muftiate?

In August 2014 the Muftiate feared that a new, apparently state-backed rival Muslim organisation – the Taurida Muftiate – was designed to split the Muslim community. The new organisation took control of a mosque in Yevpatoriya. However, on 17 February 2015, Judge Antonina Lantratova of Yevpatoriya City Court ruled against the new organisation and upheld the rights of the Muftiate to the mosque, according to court records.

Despite these earlier fears, the Muftiate now appears to be about to receive a de facto monopoly on all mosques which will be registered.

Following the re-registration of the Muftiate itself, it is preparing to lodge re-registration applications for its more than 300 individual mosques and religious schools.

However, one of Crimea's Deputy Chairs of the Council of Ministers, Ruslan Balbek, told a visiting Turkish delegation in Simferopol on 25 March that all mosques in Crimea would be handed to the Muftiate and would be legally registered, according to local news agencies. The reason was "not to give sects the possibility to wage a struggle for places of worship". Balbek spoke of alleged earlier seizures of mosques by radicals, such as Wahhabis and members of the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement.

No hope of property return?

Despite Russia's 2010 Law on the Transfer of Religious Property to Religious Organisations, the authorities in Sevastopol have recently reaffirmed their refusal to return the confiscated Catholic Church of St Clement's. The building – which was confiscated from the Catholics in 1936 – was later turned into the Friendship Cinema. It has been empty for more than a decade (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

Russia's 2010 Law has proved to be no guarantee that the restitution process will be easy or unchallenged, or indeed that religious property confiscated during the Soviet period will be returned at all (see F18News 31 May 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1961).

St Clement's parish – which currently meets in a converted flat - has repeatedly tried to regain its former church. A Christmas service was held on the street outside the building on the evening of 24 December 2014.

Sevastopol's Culture Department is not prepared to return the church to the congregation, Dmitry Garnega, head of the newly-established Sevastopol Kino, which manages on behalf of the city all its cinemas, told the local ForPost news website on 23 March. He said his agency is planning to renovate the building – of which, he added, the roof is leaking - and re-open it as a children's cinema soon.

Garnega told Radio Free Europe's Crimean Service on 6 March that as 70 percent of the building had been destroyed during the Second World War and been rebuilt as a cinema, it should not be returned to the Catholics. He pointed out that the parish had lost its attempts to regain the building through the local courts even as far up as the Ukrainian Supreme Court in Kiev.

However, an unnamed local lawyer told Radio Free Europe that as Russian law is clearer than Ukrainian law on the issue of return of confiscated religious property, it might now be easier for the Catholics to regain their property.

Aleksandr Litvinenko, head of Sevastopol's Culture Department, was unable to speak to Forum 18 on 25 March as he had visitors, an official told Forum 18. She insisted that the issue of the future use of the cinema "is not within the competence of the Culture Department".

Vladimir Ryabykh, head of the Nationalities Section of Sevastopol's Culture Department, claimed that the church cannot be returned as the Catholic parish has not asked for it back. "I recently had a meeting with the priest Fr Anatolij Klak, but he isn't a citizen," Ryabykh told Forum 18 from Sevastopol on 25 March. "If a group of citizens submit an appeal we will consider it. Everything will be done according to procedure."

Following the rejection of their suits through the Ukrainian courts, the parish lodged a case against the Ukrainian government at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (Application No. 22607/02). Although the Court sought a response from the Ukrainian government in October 2008, no progress has been seen in the case since then, a Court spokesperson told Forum 18 on 24 March 2015.

By contrast, on 23 July 2014 the Crimean Council of Ministers issued a decree returning the confiscated Kenasa (synagogue) in Simferopol to the Karaite community, according to its website. A handover ceremony was held at the building the same day.

The Kenasa – located on Karaim street in Simferopol – was opened in 1896 but forcibly closed it in 1930. The community had been seeking its return since 1992. Officials began responding to these demands in summer 2014 (see F18News 27 June 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1973).

Building plots threatened?

The Kiev Patriarchate has been alarmed by a 5 February letter from Gennady Bakharev, head of Simferopol city administration, that asked for the church to "voluntarily give up" the site of 0.49 hectares (1.2 acres) it had been allocated in April 2013 to build a new cathedral. The letter – seen by Forum 18 – explained that the site was needed for housing for the military and their families, and came at the request of the FSB security service. Archbishop Kliment noted to Forum 18 that this issue has not yet been resolved.

Similarly, the Muftiate has insisted that the site for a future Cathedral Mosque for Simferopol must not be revoked. On 12 February, one of the Deputy Muftis, Ayder Ismailov, rejected calls by some politicians to take back the site, the local QHA news agency noted. He pointed out that community members had already collected 180,000 stones towards its construction. The city authorities allocated the site to the Muftiate in 2011.

Ukrainian Churches are facing imminent ban in Crimea

KHPG (27.02.2015) - <http://www.khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1424900970> As feared, the demand that religious communities re-register according to Russian legislation is being used as a weapon enabling an effective ban on Ukrainian churches and religious organizations functioning in Crimea. It is only one of a number of methods used against all but one faith in Russian-occupied Crimea.

Concern that the requirement to re-register would be used in this way was first [expressed](#) in Oct. 2014 by the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations back on Oct 20. Now, as the deadline of March 1 (extended from the initial Jan 1) approaches, the Institute for Religious Freedom [has sounded the alarm](#). IRF explains that Article 19 of the relevant Russian law states that legal entities which have not brought their founding documents into line with Russian legislation and have not submitted applications to be added to the Single State Register of Legal Entities as branches of a foreign legal entity by the date stipulated will not be able to operate in Russia (including Russian-occupied Crimea) and will be dissolved.

And if they have applied, but the will is not there to reregister?

According to Alexander Selevko, head of the Department for Religious Affairs and National-Cultural Societies within the Crimean Culture Ministry, the reregistration process is "proving difficult", despite the extension of the deadline to March 1.

Vladimir Bobrovsky, authorized Crimean representative of the Russian President, reports that only 9 societies have re-registered, with 73 currently in the process of re-registration. Only 2 religious organizations have registered in Moscow.

IRF reports that at the beginning of 2014 there were 1, 409 religious organizations registered as legal entities in Crimea, and around 674 religious communities, mainly Crimean Tatar, which functioned without registration.

Russian legislation is more restrictive than Ukrainian with respect to believers, imposing far more onerous demands on bodies wishing to function as a legal entity. As reported here, one particular point of concern is Russia's extensive use of dangerously broad 'anti-extremism' legislation. Maksym Vasin, head of IRL pointed out in [a comparison](#) of the two countries' legislation that Ukraine simply does not have such a concept as 'extremism' and people face prosecution for specific acts falling within the scope of the Criminal Code.

IRF warns that the loss of legal entity status will have greatest impact on Ukrainian religious communities' property rights, with them losing the right to use and dispose of their churches, mosques, places of worship or other buildings. They will also be severely restricted since only registered bodies can carry out religious rites in hospitals, kindergartens, homes for the elderly and prisoners; invite foreign nationals to come to work; open bank accounts for donations; buy or rent premises for services and other property; produce and circulate literature, printed, audio or visual material; carry out charitable work; establish and maintain international contacts.

IRF points out that the difficulties with re-registration are clearly aimed at forcing Ukrainians in Crimea to take Russian citizenship and come under the jurisdiction of Russian religious centres.

Use of legislative demands for re-registration are among various means using against all religious faiths in Crimea, bar one – the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate.

In late November the Crimean Human Rights Field Mission [held a joint press conference](#) with representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Kyiv Patriarchate; the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Ukraine and a number of Protestant communities. All had tales to tell since Russia's annexation of Crimea of discrimination; attempts to discredit them; destruction of their property; summonses for questioning and other forms of pressure and intimidation,

Several Kyiv Patriarchate Orthodox priests have been forced to leave the Crimea and the majority have been summoned to the FSB for questioning.

Kyiv Patriarchate churches have been shut down in Sevastopol; Krasnoperekopsk; Kerch, as well as in the village of Perevalne, which was [subjected to an armed attack](#) in June.

The Kyiv Patriarchate representative reported that FSB [Russian security service] officers had turned up at church services and demonstrably observed worshippers. Soon after annexation, veteran Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemiliev reported that the FSB were openly watching believers in Crimean mosques.

In June Pastor Ruslan Zuyev from the Salvation Army left the Crimea after being the object of overt harassment by the Simferopol FSB. He says that they began phoning and then turned up at his office asking strange questions. His wife and daughter had also received threats.

Rabbi Misha Kapustin left Simferopol following threats over his opposition to Russia's occupation of the Crimea. Russian propaganda was subsequently [caught out](#) faking material in order to suggest that he had fled Ukraine out of fear of the supposed 'fascist Kyiv junta'.

Crimean Muslims have suffered most from abuse of Russia's law on extremism, as well as its enormous list of prohibited literature. Anti-extremism legislation has been cited and used without any justification since the peaceful protests against the ban on veteran Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemiliev returning to his homeland, and especially in the offensive against the Mejlis or representative body of the Crimean Tatar People. There have been frequent armed searches of homes, mosques and religious schools with the claim being that they are looking for 'arms, narcotics and extremist literature'

According to the [latest Crimean Field Mission report](#), in January there were only 9 Kyiv Patriarchate Orthodox Church parishes left in Crimea, against 14 a year earlier.

Particular concern is expressed about the position of supporters of the Hizb-ul-Takhrir movement which was always legal in Ukraine, but is one of the numerous organizations which Russia considers 'terrorist'. Three people – Ruslan Zeitullayev; Nuri Primov; and Rustem Vaitov were arrested by the FSB on Jan 23, and are now in custody. They are charged with organizing and taking part in an organization which until Russia invaded and annexed Crimea was totally legal, yet one could face from 15 to 20 years imprisonment, the other two – from 5 to 10 years. The men's relatives and friends are adamant that the men were not involved in any terrorist activities and are followers of Islam.

A recently adopted 'comprehensive plan' for countering the **ideology of terrorism**, names those whom the occupation regime, following Russia, believes need to be 'identified' and "persuaded to renounce their unlawful and destructive ways, repent and take part in prophylactic measures". The list includes "*active members and ideologues of non-traditional religious organizations and sects functioning in Crimea.*"

That document, like other legislative measures and practice, give the occupation regime enormous scope for abuse against those whose views or religious beliefs are deemed undesirable.

Pentecostal leader content with Russian policy

Bishop Konstantin Bendas explains extension of church jurisdiction of ROSKhVE to some congregations of the peninsula

By Andrei Melnikov

NG-Religii (04.02.2015) - At a recent session of the administration of the Russian Associated Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals) (Rossiiskii Obedinennyi Soiuz Khristian Very Evangelskoi--ROSKhVE) a decision was adopted for the inclusion in the membership of this centralized organization of a number of churches and religious associations. Some of the local religious organizations that officially joined the union represent new Russian regions. In connection with this, a ROSKhVE administration for the republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol will be established. Attention is turned to the fact that the association of Pentecostals is just about the only religious congregation that has officially included in its membership some Crimean parishes. We recall that the Moscow patriarchate, for example, left the Crimean dioceses under the

jurisdiction of the Kiev metropolia. The executive editor of NG-R, Andrei Melnikov, learned about the significance of the ROSKhVE decision from Bishop Konstantin Bendas, who has been appointed the head of the administration of the union for Crimea and Sevastopol.

--(A.M.) Why was it necessary to unite the Crimean churches of Christians of Evangelical Faith under the aegis of ROSKhVE? After all, the Pentecostal movement does not assume obligatory centralization and for the sake of political expediency would it not be possible to avoid such a demonstrative step?

--(K.B.) There are about 100 congregations of Christians of Evangelical Faith in Crimea and Sevastopol. There has not been nor is there a goal of uniting them under the aegis of ROSKhVE. The step was not demonstrative but necessary, or more accurately, natural. First of all there is a number of congregations who are historically more cooperative with churches on Russian territory, including members of our association who have conducted joint worship services and theological conferences and who have a common educational structure and spiritual advisors. There are not many of them; I think ten to fifteen. Judiciously at the present time the administration of the union decided to incorporate into ROSKhVE only three congregations and other applications are being considered by the Spiritual Council. Some congregations were officially rejected. We are not playing politics and we do not accept formal, fictitious relations.

--By what criteria are congregations accepted into ROSKhVE, and by what are they rejected?

--There are no special criteria for Crimea. There are general principles. First of all is doctrinal or theological unity, in accordance with the confession of the Nicaea-Constantinople Creed and canonical statutes officially adopted by ROSKhVE. We especially consider the correspondence of the clergy of these congregations to the canonical rules of ordination of clergy of the ROSKhVE. As to specific reasons for refusal, allow me to be silent. I can say that from the moment of the creation of ROSKhVE it has always been easier to leave us than to join our brotherhood. We are very conservative or, I would say, orthodox in following biblical commandments and principles.

--Did the three congregations who were accepted into ROSKhVE, and those whose applications were considered, previously belong to protestant associations of Ukraine?

--Some of the religious organizations were members of centralized structures and some operated autonomously and there are several religious groups who in the event of the adoption of a positive decision will for the first time be registered as religious organizations within the membership of ROSKhVE.

--How did Ukrainian associations react to the ROSKhVE decision to extend its jurisdiction into Crimea?

--In the course of a year I met with heads of several associations of Christians of Evangelical Faith of Ukraine. The majority of them had an absolutely biblical view of the situation. Churches and people must minister, and if in a given political situation this is difficult for clergy of a Ukrainian jurisdiction, then let them operate as Russians. The church must be above politics and any conditions of this world. In the gospel of Luke, chapter 14, we find Christ's question addressed to those Pharisee leaders who wished to ensnare him: "If one of your donkeys or oxen falls into a ditch, then would you not immediately pull him out even on the Sabbath?" Unfortunately I have had occasion to hear some expressions of the type "Don't give in to anybody and it's better to drown."

This is not a pastoral position. We do not have the right not to extend a helping hand to our brethren in Crimea.

--How can ROSKhVE respond to the accusations of Russian "sect-fighters" to the effect that the Maidan in Kiev was organized by anti-Russian and pro-American oriented protestants? Such accusations usually are accompanied by references to the religious affiliation of Turchinov.

--Organized? I think that the "comrades" are overestimating the capacities of Ukrainian protestants. And for the accuracy of the investigation, let's clarify the confessional affiliation of all leaders and instigators of the Maidan. I think that protestants remain in the minority.

--So that means that we should not regard the patriotic actions of ROSKhVE with respect to congregations of Crimea as an image-building course against the background of accusations against Ukrainian protestants?

--Patriotic actions? Image-building course? This is the natural ministry of the church. And for me, appointment as the head of the diocesan administration for Crimea and Sevastopol is only obedience and an additional burden upon my already existing responsibilities, which, I hope, with God's help, I will be able to bear worthily.

--How have believers in Crimea taken your appointment? After all, you are Siberian and not a native of the peninsula.

--I cannot speak for all Crimean believers. I have received congratulations from friends and acquaintances. Every time I come to the peninsula I am inspired by the warmth and hospitality of its inhabitants. Strange as it may sound, such hospitality is generally received in my homeland, in Siberia. In addition, I am accustomed to serve the Lord and his church without regard to person and not expecting thanks or praise from people.

--Final question. On a somewhat different topic. "NG" recently wrote that a draft law is being prepared for monitoring religious organizations that receive money from abroad. Do you think that this will affect protestant organizations? To what extent do they depend on foreign donors? Do you think that this rule violates the principles of the equality of religions in Russia?

--I will begin with the last. I do not think that this in any way violates the principle of the equality of religions. I think that the majority of protestant religious organizations will not be affected. And churches of ROSKhVE will not be affected at all. ROSKhVE does not even have a foreign currency account. As I recall, we opened one twice, but each time we closed it as superfluous. Foreign financing of protestants is a myth. In the 1990s there was humanitarian and financial aid from foreign missionary organizations and individual fraternal churches. We, just like the whole country, needed it. Remember the early 1990s, empty shelves in grocery stores, unfunded orphanages, retirement homes, hospitals. . . .

Today the arriving foreign philanthropist loses all desire to contribute money for Russia as soon as he lands at Sheremetovo airport and sees the number of cars of the representative class pulling up. Russian protestants have learned themselves both to make money and to contribute to social projects. The protestant work ethic is not the construct of Max Weber. Today we are sending missionary teams from Russia to dozens of countries of the world and financing them ourselves. Within Russia we are supporting hundreds of social institutions and projects.

As to the draft law prepared by the Ministry of Justice, I am more bothered by the global expansion of functions of this agency in the sphere of control over the financial and economic activity of religious organizations. To scheduled inspections there may be added countless unscheduled inspections and all kinds of inquiries on artificially created pretexts.

I participated in two conferences on this draft law—inside the Ministry of Justice and within the framework of a session of a commission under the Russian government. I do not wish to offend the professionals who worked on it, but I think that the very approach to resolving the question of preventing extremist and terrorist activity through religious organizations is incorrect. Expansion of authority is unnecessary. It is necessary to improve the efficiency of the work and methods of the "E" center of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the prosecutor's office and of the Russian Financial Monitoring and other agencies that are already legislatively empowered in this area. (tr. by PDS, posted 4 February 2015)

"Subject to action by the law-enforcement agencies"

Forum 18 (26.01.2015) - The two and a half month moratorium on prosecutions for religious and other literature the Russian authorities regard as "extremist" – declared by Sergei Aksyonov, head of Crimea's Russian-backed government - expired at the end of 2014. "Sergei Aksyonov gave people the opportunity to hand in such literature," his spokesperson Yekaterina Polonchuk told Forum 18 News Service from the Crimean capital Simferopol on 21 January. "Those who didn't will be subject to action by the law-enforcement agencies." But, she added, "people don't need to fear if they abide by the law".

Forum 18 asked Polonchuk in writing the same day whether Aksyonov had issued any instructions to the Prosecutor's Office, FSB security service or the police following the end of the moratorium, and whether the widespread resumption of raids, religious literature seizures and fines should be expected. No response had arrived by the end of the working day in Simferopol on 26 January.

After numerous complaints, particularly from Crimean Tatars, Aksyonov announced the moratorium in mid-October 2014 (see F18News 29 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010).

"The question is now closed"?

Although raids, literature seizures and administrative fines for religious books the Russian authorities regard as "extremist" seem to have reduced during the moratorium, they did not stop (see below). However, now the moratorium is ended, it remains unclear if such raids, fines and confiscations will resume.

No one at Crimea's Prosecutor's Office in Simferopol was willing to discuss raids to seize such religious literature and administrative fines. Colleagues of spokesperson Natalya Boyarkina told Forum 18 on 19 January that she was out of the office attending official celebrations of Crimea's flag. Subsequent calls between then and 26 January went unanswered.

Aleksandr Selevko, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry in Simferopol, declined to say if raids and fines will resume more widely now government head Aksyonov's moratorium is over. He also declined to comment on earlier raids or

finer. "The authorities must have had a reason to conduct the raids," he told Forum 18 on 20 January. "I also can't comment on court decisions."

A Muslim Board spokesperson was keen to stress that the period of raids and searches on Muslim Board mosques and religious schools was over. "Such searches haven't taken place on our institutions since September 2014, nor have there been fines on our officials since then either," a Muslim Board spokesperson told Forum 18 on 20 January. "The question is now closed – thank Allah!"

Moratorium – fines reduced but didn't stop

Much of 2014 saw police, Russian FSB security service and Prosecutor's Office raids and searches across Crimea – including for religious literature banned under Russian law – in libraries, schools, political organisations, Muslim homes, mosques and madrassahs (Islamic schools), and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls.

Individuals – especially Muslims and librarians – were subjected to fines under Russia's Administrative Code Article 20.29. This punishes "Production or distribution of extremist materials" from the Russian Justice Ministry's Federal List of Extremist Materials. If convicted, individuals receive up to 15 days' detention or a fine of 1,000 to 3,000 Roubles (240 to 720 Ukrainian Hryvnas, 120 to 350 Norwegian Kroner, 15 to 40 Euros or 15 to 45 US Dollars). Fines for people in an official capacity (such as individual entrepreneurs) range from 2,000 to 5,000 Roubles. The banned literature is also confiscated (see F18News 29 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010).

One fine, two further cases underway

Even while the moratorium existed, cases under Administrative Code Article 20.29 were lodged against two Jehovah's Witness communities in Dzhankoi. Both cases reached Dzhankoi District Court on 17 December 2014, where they were assigned to Judge Eduard Pikula the following day, according to court records. After several hearings in each case, the Judge ordered the cases closed in hearings on 20 January 2015. However, the prosecution has appealed against both rulings.

On 23 December 2014, Judge Vitali Mikhailov of Simferopol's Central District Court fined Ali Ibragimov 2,000 Russian Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.29, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. Ibragimov was deemed to be the responsible person at a local mosque raided by police on 17 September 2014, during which one copy each of three Muslim books on Russia's Federal List were found and seized. The court ordered the three books confiscated.

In court Ibragimov insisted that the books were not his and that for several months around that time he had taken a break from overseeing the mosque. However, the Judge rejected his arguments. Ibragimov appealed against the fine.

Punishment to follow search and confiscation?

On 18 December 2014, searches took place in a mosque and the home of a Crimean Tatar family, the Yagyaevs, in the village of Turgenevka (Teberti in Crimean Tatar) in Bakhchisaray District. Two minibuses full of armed men and four cars arrived mid-morning to conduct the searches. Police and prosecutors claim to have been looking for weapons, drugs and religious literature, Mustafa Yagyaev told Voice of Crimea radio station the same day. After a five-hour search, police officers took religious books among other items. Turgenevka's mosque was also again searched, but no "banned" books, weapons or drugs were found there. No new case against Yagyaev appears to have reached court.

During an earlier search on the mosque, seven Muslim books deemed "extremist" in Russia were seized. Yagyaev, as head of the mosque community, was found guilty under Russian Administrative Code Article 20.29 at Bakhchisaray District Court on 29 September 2014 and fined 1,500 Russian Roubles (see F18News 29 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010).

Further "extremism" punishments

Another librarian was punished because a library under her jurisdiction contained a religious book deemed "extremist" in Russia and placed on Russia's Federal List of Extremist Materials. During an inspection for "extremist" literature in all the libraries in Kerch, prosecutors inspecting a branch library in Kapkany on the eastern side of the town discovered one copy of the book "Fundamentals of Islam" by Abua Ala Maududi, banned in Russia in 2007. They then brought an administrative case on 2 October 2014 against the head of the town's Belinsky Library and other local libraries, Lyudmila Popova, under Administrative Code Article 20.29.

Popova's written rejection of the accusation against her insisted that her work was still governed by the provisions of Ukrainian law and that the fact that the book had been on the shelf of one library had not constituted "mass distribution". However, prosecutors insisted on charging her, pointing out that the book had been borrowed six times. On 30 October 2014, Judge Inessa Grigorevskaya of Kerch Town Court found her guilty. The Judge fined Popova 2,000 Russian Roubles, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The book was ordered confiscated.

On 18 November 2014, Judge Aleksei Nanarov of Yevpatoriya Town Court found Edem Raimov guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.29, according to court records. The Judge's assistant told Forum 18 on 19 January 2015 that Raimov had been fined 1,000 Russian Roubles for possession of one Muslim book on Russia's Federal List. He did not appeal against the fine.

Several other individuals were punished by courts in Crimea in November and December 2014 under Administrative Code 20.29. However, Forum 18 has been unable to establish whether these individuals were brought to court for possessing religious literature or for possessing racist or violent material.

Case dismissed

By contrast, Natalya Chigrina, a lecturer in the Philosophy Faculty of the Simferopol-based Tavrida Vernadsky National University and director of the university library, escaped punishment for two Muslim books on Russia's Federal List. The two books – "Life of the Prophet Muhammad" by Ibn Hisham, an early 9th century Muslim writer, and "Gardens of the Righteous" - were found during a raid on the library.

An administrative case against Chigrina under Article 20.29 was handed to Simferopol's Kiev District Court on 15 October 2014. However, she protested her innocence of any intention to store and distribute these two books. She and several colleagues summoned as witnesses insisted that in the ten years that the books (received as gifts) had been in the closed section of the library they had not once been handed to a reader or displayed. On 27 November 2014, at the end of the fourth hearing in the case, Judge Viktor Kozlenko dismissed the case against her, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The decision did not say what would happen to the two confiscated books.

Fine overturned

Imam Savri Seidametov, who leads prayers at the mosque in the village of Bogatyr in

Bakhchisaray District, succeeded in overturning a fine for possessing one Muslim book deemed by Russia "extremist". On 20 November 2014, Judge Yuri Dedeyev cancelled the fine, deeming the presence of "just one single book" to be an "insignificant offence". He chose instead to issue Seidametov with a "verbal admonition", according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

On 16 October 2014, Bakhchisaray District Court had fined imam Seidametov 1,000 Russian Roubles under Article 20.29, according to court records. Seidametov was fined for having two religious books in his mosque when it was raided on 24 September. However, only one is on Russia's Federal List: "A Word on Unity", which had been declared "extremist" in 2007. The book was ordered confiscated (see F18News 29 October 2014 http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2010).

Vitaly Ponomarev of the Moscow-based Memorial human rights organisation – who attended the October 2014 hearing – said the deficiencies over legality and the substantiation of accusations as the case proceeded left him with a "very vivid impression".

Ponomarev noted to the Crimean Human Rights Field Mission that "no-one tried to establish who the building where the forbidden literature was found belonged to. No proof was presented that the book belonged to the person who was fined." He stressed that only one of the two books seized had been banned in Russia, and even then, the court did not establish that the book was the same as the one on Russia's Federal List, merely that it had the same title. "The court decision said that the imam of the mosque had been involved not only in storing but also in the mass distribution of extremist literature, even though no proof was established that anyone had read this book."

Ponomarev also pointed out that Imam Seidametov had told the court that he only leads prayers and is not responsible for maintaining the mosque and is not constantly present at the mosque. "The court ignored all these arguments," Ponomarev lamented.

New case being prepared against Jehovah's Witnesses?

Meanwhile, on 27 October 2014, an administrative case against Jehovah's Witnesses in Simferopol reached the city's Central District Court. A record of an offence had been drawn up against the community under Administrative Code Article 20.29. However, on 20 November 2014, Judge Olga Andreyeva sent back the case as the record of an offence had been drawn up incorrectly, according to court records. The case does not appear to have returned to court.

Crimea's new Religion Law

Crimea's Russian rulers have promised over several months to adopt a Crimean law to control religious activity. On 15 October 2014, head of government Aksyonov presented to the Supreme Council a draft law "on freedom of conscience, religious associations and the prevention of religious extremism". In his explanatory note to the draft – both of which were made public on 16 October 2014 on the Supreme Council website – he claimed that the law would "secure the equality of all traditional religious confessions, the constitutional right of citizens to freedom of conscience and religion, as well as public security".

Aksyonov did not explain why preventing religious "extremism" was included in the same draft law as ensuring freedom of conscience. Nor did he explain what constitutes a "traditional religious confession" and whether what he regards as "non-traditional" religious communities should therefore have fewer or no rights.

The proposed law would particularly have imposed restrictions on "missionary activity", allowing only "missionaries" approved by registered religious organisations and using literature published by named registered religious organisations. Indeed, the proposed law would have made it impossible for anyone apart from registered religious organisations to produce literature and items for use in religious services. It remains unclear if this would have banned anyone else from producing other sorts of religious literature or items.

However, Supreme Council deputies rejected the draft law on its first reading on 5 December 2014 and sent it back, krymedia.ru noted the same day. Deputies argued that regulating religious organisations and preventing extremism should be handled in separate laws.

That day the Supreme Council's Culture Committee formed a Working Group with nine members – including one of Crimea's Deputy Muftis, Ayder Ismailov, and Fr Ioann Pristinsky, Head of the Orthodox Simferopol and Crimea Diocese's Legal Department. A deadline of 15 April 2015 was set for the Working Group to present a completed draft to the Committee, the Supreme Council website noted on 5 December 2014.

Asked why Crimea needs its own Religion Law, Selevko of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department claimed to Forum 18 that such a Law would "make life easier for religious communities here". He said the draft now being prepared will be completely new, and will include provisions to make it similar to the provisions of the Ukrainian law. Asked whether the restrictions on religious publishing and "missionary" activity in rejected government draft are likely to remain, he insisted they would not.

Convent closed following nuns' enforced departure

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 News (18.01.2015) - Almost 18 years after it was founded, a small Catholic convent in Crimea's capital Simferopol was forced to close down in November 2014 when its three Franciscan nuns had to leave. They were refused the possibility of extending their residence permits in Crimea, the chancellor of the Odessa and Simferopol Catholic diocese Fr Krzysztof Kontek told Forum 18 News Service from the Ukrainian city of Odessa on 15 January 2015. The sisters – who are from elsewhere in Ukraine and Poland – had been helping in pastoral work in the city's Catholic parish. Their enforced departure came a month after the parish's main priest was similarly forced to leave.

Also December 2014 saw the enforced departure of the last of Crimea's 23 imams and Muslim teachers from Turkey, a spokesperson for the Muslim Board told Forum 18 from Simferopol on 20 January.

Officials from the Crimean branch of Russia's Federal Migration Service insisted to Forum 18 in October 2014 that only registered religious communities are able to invite foreign citizens. As no religious community in Crimea or Sevastopol (an administratively separate city) has state registration recognised by the Russian authorities, no community is thus able to invite foreign religious workers.

A Russian law from 31 December 2014 extended the deadline for re-registering religious communities (and other entities) in Crimea until 1 March 2015 (see below).

Fines for religious books the Russian authorities regard as "extremist" seem to have reduced in recent months, though they did not stop. However, as the moratorium on raids, literature seizures and prosecutions in such cases ended, it remains unclear if such raids, fines and confiscations will resume (see forthcoming F18News article). Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and librarians have been particular targets.

The moratorium was announced by the head of Crimea's Russian-backed government, Sergei Aksyonov, in mid-October 2014.

Despite these concerns among a variety of religious communities, Aksyonov insists that his authorities will defend the rights of religious believers. "The rights of Crimea's religious believers, regardless of their confessional adherence, are well protected," he claimed on 19 January, in remarks quoted on the Crimean government website.

"Now we have only the bishop, six priests and five sisters"

The convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary was founded in Simferopol in March 1997. "The sisters tried to get Russian papers to remain in Crimea but couldn't," Fr Kontek told Forum 18. He noted that in addition to Fr Piotr Rosochacki, who was forced to leave in October 2014, other Catholic priests too have been forced out. "Some chose not to apply for Russian papers – Migration Service officials had 'recommended' to them not to apply." Fr Kontek said he did not know why officials had given such "recommendations".

Fr Rosochacki, the main priest at Simferopol's Assumption of the Virgin Mary parish, was the first Roman Catholic priest forced to leave.

"Just one priest remains in Simferopol to serve the Catholic parish," Fr Kontek lamented to Forum 18. "He has to do everything now by himself."

In March 2014, before the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Roman Catholic Church had a bishop, Jacek Pyl, 12 priests and eight sisters in the peninsula, Fr Kontek noted. "Now we have only the bishop, six priests and five sisters." Bishop Pyl – a Polish citizen – has been promised a Russian residence permit allowing him to remain in Crimea, Fr Kontek added.

Enforced departure of last Turkish imams and teachers

The enforced departure of the last of the original 23 Turkish imams and teachers who had been working in Crimea at the invitation of the Muslim Board means that all its imams and religious teachers are now local people, the Muslim Board spokesperson told Forum 18.

The Turkish imams and teachers had been supplied by the Turkish government's Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs) under a programme that had been running for two decades. "These Turkish imams and teachers helped our communities to develop and people liked them and got used to them," a Muftiate spokesperson told Forum 18 in August 2014. "Of course we wanted them to continue working here."

When Crimea's chief mufti Emirali Ablaev met Mehmet Görmez, the head of the Turkish government's Diyanet in Ankara in November 2014, he stressed the continuing need for such Turkish teachers and imams in Crimea. "The Muslim Board wants this issue resolved," the spokesperson told Forum 18.

"We've done all we can within our competence"

Aleksandr Selevko, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Crimea's Culture Ministry in Simferopol, said that in response by concerns from some religious communities over the current impossibility of inviting foreign citizens for religious work, he wrote to Russia's Justice Ministry in December 2014.

"We asked them to review the law and introduce a special procedure for foreign religious workers to be able to continue to work in Crimea as they had been able under Ukrainian law," he told Forum 18 on 20 January. "The Ministry did not initiate a change to the law. We've done all we can within our competence. We can't resolve this ourselves."

Selevko added that he had met Bishop Pyl several times and explained the situation to him. He did not mention to Forum 18 any meetings with Muslim Board officials to discuss how to bring Turkish imams and teachers back to Crimea.

Re-registration uncertainty

Following meetings with leaders of about ten religious communities – including Lutheran, Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Karaim representatives – on 29 December 2014, head of government Aksyonov acknowledged that worries about re-registration were "the main concern" they raised, according to the government website.

With Russia's Justice Ministry in Moscow and its local branch in Crimea having failed to re-register any religious communities in Crimea or Sevastopol by the previously-declared deadline of 31 December 2014, the deadline was extended to 1 March 2015. The extension came in an amending law finally adopted by Russia's Parliament on 25 December 2014 and signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on 31 December 2014.

Crimean religious communities which are seeking status as centralised Russian religious organisations need to re-register with the Justice Ministry in Moscow. Ones that are not seeking such status need to re-register in Crimea.

No religious organisations in Crimea or Sevastopol were listed on the Justice Ministry website as having state registration on 19 January, the date of the latest update. Irina Demetskaya, head of the Registration Department for Non-Commercial Organisations at the Justice Ministry in Simferopol, told Forum 18 on 20 January that her Department had approved re-registration for eight local religious communities – all of them Pentecostal or Evangelical Christian. She said their documents are now with the tax authorities for approval before registration certificates can be issued.

Demetskaya added that her two other religious communities seeking independent re-registration – an Augsburg Lutheran congregation and a Baptist congregation – have had their applications sent to Moscow as required by regulations for the Justice Ministry to conduct an "expert analysis" before re-registration can be granted.

A total of 1,546 religious communities in Crimea had state registration with the Ukrainian authorities at the time Russia annexed the peninsula in March 2014.

Asked if religious communities which are subject to oversight bodies in Ukraine – including the dioceses of the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Kiev Patriarchate, as well as parishes of the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church – will be able to get state registration, Demetskaya was vague. "They'll have to undergo expert analysis in Moscow," was all she would say.

Many religious communities have told Forum 18 that they lodged re-registration applications by the end of December 2014 but have received no response from the Justice Ministry so far.

Selevko of the Culture Ministry's Religious Affairs Department was ready to excuse what appears to be a chaotic re-registration process. "We don't have experience of a territory moving from one legal field to another," he told Forum 18. But he stressed that he is not involved in the re-registration process. "It's not my kitchen."
