

Russian Rebels Shutting Down Protestant Churches In Ukraine, Armed Men Raiding Christian Worship

*By Stoyan Zaimov , Christian Post Reporter
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Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine's Luhansk region have been cracking down on Protestant Christianity by raiding churches, dispersing worshippers, and preventing re-registration.

[Forum 18](#), a Norwegian human rights organization, revealed that the rebels have issued mandatory re-registration orders for religious organizations in the region, but have denied approval for many.

No Baptist or Seventh-day Adventist communities were reportedly able to re-register, with the latter having to halt all activities in order to prevent churches being seized.

There have been several instances of Protestant churches being raided in the past few months. Armed rebels raided a Baptist church in Brianka late in September, while the pastor of Krasny Luch Baptist church is facing possible punishment for allowing Sunday morning worship without registration.

Twelve police officers shut down the Sunday morning meeting at Revival Baptist Church, telling the 25 worshippers gathered to go home. Several of them were questioned, however, while Pastor Dmitry Sirbu was forced to watch as the church's safe was drilled in.

Sirbu is facing legal threats for violating the Administrative Code for allowing the gathering.

In another instance in August, men armed with automatic weapons raided Grace Church of God Pentecostal Church in Alchevsk during a worship meeting, forcing Christians to lie face down on the floor, as they seized church computers.

In light of the crackdown, Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organizations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Youth and Sport Ministry in Luhansk, has refused to give a reason for why so many churches are being denied their registration.

Luhansk, in the Eastern region of Ukraine, remains under rebel control nearly four years after the escalation of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Authorities have said that their demands for religious organizations to re-register follows a May 2015 decree that banned mass events under martial law, in an attempt to form a firm grip over the activities of the people.

Roman Catholic Churches have also had to reapply for registration, though they are still waiting to hear back an answer.

Others, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, have said that they will not even attempt to re-register, given that the denomination has been banned in Russia.

"It feels logical, since the Donetsk authorities have recently also banned the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses, following the course of the Russian Federation," a Jehovah's Witnesses member, who wasn't named, told Forum 18.

"Another reason is that the registration procedure implies the revealing of personal information on the worshipers who could easily become new targets of persecution," he added.

The [Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group](#) reported that Muslims have also been targeted in Crimea, the region that was annexed by Russia in 2014.

"Since Russia has criminalized people's beliefs, Muslims in occupied Crimea and Russia face guaranteed persecution merely for espousing Hizb ut-Tahrir views," the group noted, referring to a pan-Islamist movement which is legal in Ukraine, but not in Russia.

"The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation has developed a system for concocting supposed 'evidence' of involvement, with this most often including 'secret witnesses' whose identity is concealed from the defence, and who give testimony from another room, almost certainly receiving prompts as to what to answer or, at very least, being able to check what they said earlier," it added.