

# **Baptist pastor and wife kidnapped in Ukraine**

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MARIUPOL, Ukraine (BP)—A Baptist pastor and his wife remain missing after being kidnapped Sept. 21 from their church in Russian-occupied Mariupol, Forum 18 News Service reported Oct. 6.

Armed masked men in Russian military uniforms took Pastor Leonid Ponomaryov and his wife Tatyana from their home in the Kalmiusky District of northern Mariupol, neighbors told Forum 18. Officials reportedly searched the home for about two and a half hours.

The Russian military also searched and sealed Ponomaryov's church—identified as Kurchatov Street Baptist Church with the Council of Churches Baptists group—and seized religious literature there, Forum 18 said, attributing reports to Mariupol Baptists.

"The neighbors distinctly heard groans and cries" as the Ponomaryovs were taken "in an unknown direction," Mariupol Baptists told Forum 18. Church members began seeking answers the following day. "But neither then nor on subsequent days could they get any answers," local Baptists told Forum 18.

Russian officials initially claimed the couple were involved in "extremist activities," but it is unclear whether they have been charged with any crime. The Ponomaryovs' children, friends and fellow pastors have been unable to determine the reason for the abduction or the couple's whereabouts.

# History of persecution in occupied territories

“Since 2014, Baptists in occupied territory have been targeted and persecuted. Forty-six Baptist churches have been damaged or completely destroyed by war since February,” said Elijah Brown, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.

“Even as we continue to hear of people of faith who have been harassed, kidnapped, or face intentional violence, we have a responsibility to pray and stand together with gospel generosity as Baptists in Ukraine and across the region remain at the forefront of peace building and providing care in the love of Christ for all who are being traumatized by this ongoing war.”

Brown noted he did not have direct confirmation about the details of the incident involving Leonid and Tatyana Ponomaryov.

The *Baptist Standard* sought independent verification of the report but did not receive a response from sources in Ukraine.

The Ponomaryovs’ children issued a statement Oct. 1 thanking the Baptist community for their prayers, as several churches were praying and fasting for the couple’s return.

“For 10 days already, we know nothing about them,” Forum 18 quoted the statement. “A group of church members from Mariupol and Rostov went (around) all the agencies and institutions, not only in Mariupol but in the regional center [Donetsk], and were told nothing about our parents anywhere.”

While Russian officials have not responded to Forum 18’s requests for information, reportedly an officer of the Russian Interior Ministry told

relatives the couple would be released after the Sept. 27 Russian-controlled referendums to annex Donetsk and three other Russian-occupied regions in Ukraine. The Sept. 27 referendums were illegal under Ukrainian and international law and have not been officially recognized by the United States and the international community.

Russia has officially occupied Mariupol since May in the war Russia launched on Ukraine in February. Russia has sealed many churches and confiscated equipment.

But despite the referendum and the forced closure of some Christian churches, other congregations, including at least two Council of Churches Baptists congregations, are still able to hold Sunday worship services. Forum 18 described the Council of Churches Baptists as unregistered churches in Ukraine that meet in property owned by one or two church members.

*With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.*