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RUSSIA: Opposition to war in Ukraine - official pressure and censorship

By Victoria Arnold, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

State censorship and control of religious communities increased following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Lutheran Archbishop Dietrich Brauer, who has left Russia, said that, at the start of the war, President Putin's administration made "a clear demand" of religious leaders to speak out in favour of the invasion. Another Protestant pastor says FSB officers visited clergy to warn them not to say anything critical in sermons or on social media. Protestors against the war on the basis of their faith continue to be detained.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in even stricter censorship and control of Russian religious communities, other public organisations, media outlets, and individuals – whether by means of prosecution for the newly created offences of "discrediting the Armed Forces" or "disseminating false information" about them, or pressure from state authorities and religious hierarchies not to condemn or discuss the war.

Lutheran Archbishop Dietrich Brauer, who has left Russia for Germany, said that, at the start of the war, President Vladimir Putin's administration made "a clear demand" of religious leaders to speak out in favour of the invasion (see below).

A pastor in a different Protestant church described to Forum 18 how FSB security service officers visited clergy to warn them not to say anything critical in sermons or on social media (see below).

Several religious organisations have apparently voluntarily endorsed the invasion, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). Its leader Patriarch Kirill has long advocated the concept of "Russky Mir" (the "Russian World"), which holds that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all constitute a single spiritual and cultural space in opposition to the liberal and secular West.

In his Sunday sermon on 6 March, Patriarch Kirill claimed that Russia was protecting the Donbas from outside pressure to abide by liberal values, especially as expressed in gay pride parades, arguing that this "indicates that we have entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance". Pope Francis stated on 3 May that the Patriarch had spent much of a video call on 16 March reading out "all the reasons that justify the Russian invasion".

Despite this official support for the war, several Moscow Patriarchate priests have resigned from their jobs – and in some cases, left the country – after their opposition to the war brought them into conflict with their dioceses (see below).

Fr Nikolay Platonov, for example, posted a YouTube video criticising Patriarch Kirill for having "justified – in fact, blessed – military action in Ukraine", and dismissing the Patriarch's argument about "gay parades" in the Donbas as "ridiculous". He also notes the pressure his diocese has put on parishes to collect donations for the Russian army in Ukraine: "No one asked the priests' opinion. All those who disagree are being identified – they will smear everyone. Nobody will be left out." Referring to President Putin, Fr Nikolay concludes: "I say this to those who can still see and hear, who still have a conscience. Run, run. A crazy subhuman is in power, who will retain power at any cost. On the altar of his vanity, he will lay thousands and hundreds of thousands of people – your children, the children of a neighbouring state" (see below).

People protesting against the war on the basis of their faith continue to be detained and prosecuted. On 8 May, police in St Petersburg detained Nikita Rezyukov outside Kazan Cathedral and charged him under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for a placard with a quote from the Psalms: "Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." Police did not respond to Forum 18's questions as to why they detained him for holding a placard with a Biblical quotation (see below).

Russia's media watchdog, Roskomnadzor, also regularly blocks websites with information about the war. Blocked material includes a Belarusian news report on the destruction of Ukrainian religious buildings, and a Ukrainian Protestant pastor's appeal to fellow clergy in Russia speak out against the invasion. Roskomnadzor did not respond to Forum 18's enquiry as to why it blocks such material (see below).

Detentions continue

Small numbers of clergy and laypeople continue to protest against the war in Ukraine from an explicitly religious standpoint. Those who protest against the war are often punished under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Courts have fined two Russian Orthodox priests and a Baptist preacher (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738) for "discrediting the armed forces" online or in sermons or conversations. Several people have been detained and some charged for using Biblical quotations or religious imagery in individual public protests.

Such public protests continued over the Victory Day May holiday weekend:

– 7 May, Khabarovsk: police detained local activist Nikolay Zodchy and charged him under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 for a placard reading "Russian! Conquer the vatnik in yourself!" ("Vatnik" is slang for an unquestioning, jingoistic nationalist; Zodchy's placard used a Latin letter V in reference to the pro-war "V" and "Z" symbols which have become popular signs of support for Russia's war in Ukraine.)

Zodchy also gave a speech to onlookers, footage of which was posted on the Sotavision YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IecKcHzHuI>):

"Those who ask, where have you been for the last eight years, I want to ask, where are you now? Why are you crying for the children of the Donbas and not for the children of Ukraine? .. [To] many of you who are Orthodox and observe Christian holidays, why do you put above all else the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, although Jesus Christ taught that it is necessary to love your neighbour and love your enemy? After all, Ukrainians are not our enemies. This enmity exists only in the heads of Russians - it was sown there by Putin. Ukrainians are our brothers in both the ethnic and the Christian sense - therefore, to those who write that I should go to the Donbas, you should go to Mariupol, Kharkiv, Bucha, and other towns and see for yourself what the so-called "Russian World" has done there."

– 8 May, St Petersburg: police detained Nikita Rezyukov outside Kazan Cathedral and charged him under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 for a placard reading "Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it", The Bible, Psalm 33:15 [as numbered in the Russian Synodal Translation] #NoToWar".

Forum 18 wrote to the St Petersburg and Leningrad Region Interior Ministry and the St Petersburg City Prosecutor's Office on 12 May, asking why Rezyukov had been detained for quoting the Bible and why this was considered grounds for prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3. Forum 18 received no reply by the middle of the working day of 13 May.

Administrative and criminal prosecutions

According to human rights news agency OVD-Info (<https://ovdinfo.org/>), as of 13 May more than 15,000 people have been detained (usually for a few hours or overnight) for participating in anti-war protests. These have included both large-scale demonstrations and individual actions such as wearing Ukrainian colours or displaying anti-war posters and placards (including those which have directly quoted from the Russian constitution or even President Putin's own speeches).

As of 5 May, also according to OVD-Info, from 24 February police had initiated at least 1,731 cases across Russia and in illegally Russian-occupied Crimea under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for making anti-war statements either in public spaces or online.

By 28 April, 39 people had been charged or placed under investigation under various parts of Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), according to OVD-Info.

So far, Criminal Code Article 207.3 is known to have been used against only one person for explicitly religious opposition to the war - Nina Belyayeva, a Protestant and Communist municipal deputy in Voronezh Region. During a meeting of Semiluk District Council, she called Russia's invasion a war crime (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737). She later wrote: "I realised that if I kept silent, I would not be able to respect myself. I wouldn't be a true Christian and human being." She fled Russia in early April.

"I can't be silent any longer": Russian Orthodox priests resign

Fr Nikolay Platonov, a parish priest from Chelyabinsk Metropolitanate (Moscow Patriarchate), requested in early April to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat, meaning that he remains a priest but is not formally employed in a parish, cathedral, or other institution) because, as he said in a video explaining his decision, "I can't be silent any longer", and because "After [this video], our

church hierarchy will inevitably want to get rid of me with some shameful [legal] article. When a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church starts to speak the truth, he immediately automatically becomes a paedophile, or a thief, or a drug addict."

Metropolitan Aleksey of Chelyabinsk and Miass granted his request on 8 April, according to a letter Fr Nikolay holds up to the camera.

In the video, posted on his YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIQHePwYSKw>) on 16 April, he criticises Patriarch Kirill for having "justified – in fact, blessed – military action in Ukraine", and dismisses the Patriarch's argument about "gay parades" in the Donbas as "ridiculous". He also notes the pressure his diocese has put on parishes to collect donations for the Russian army in Ukraine: "No one asked the priests' opinion. All those who disagree are being identified – they will smear everyone. Nobody will be left out."

Referring to President Putin, Fr Nikolay concludes: "I say this to those who can still see and hear, who still have a conscience. Run, run. A crazy subhuman is in power, who will retain power at any cost. On the altar of his vanity, he will lay thousands and hundreds of thousands of people – your children, the children of a neighbouring state."

Fr Nikolay was among nearly 300 Russian Orthodox priests to sign an open letter calling for "reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire" in Ukraine (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true). The letter criticised the suppression of protests against the war, and stated that "we believe that the people of Ukraine should make their choice on their own, not at gunpoint, without pressure from West or East".

Another priest who signed the open letter, Fr Sergey Titkov, also requested to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat) on 30 March "for health reasons", according to his letter to Ryazan Diocese, which he posted on his Facebook and VKontakte pages.

A letter from Metropolitan Mark of Ryazan and Mikhailov, dated 29 March and also posted on Fr Sergey's social media, stated that people who had attended the Church of the Intercession in the village of Turlatovo had informed diocesan authorities that Fr Sergey was not reading the "Prayer for the Restoration of Peace" during services, a fact confirmed by the priest himself at a meeting with the diocesan secretary. The Metropolitan demanded that Fr Sergey provide a written explanation by 4 April of his "non-fulfilment of the blessing of the Holy Patriarch, who calls on faithful children of the Russian Orthodox Church to offer this prayer at every service".

(Patriarch Kirill issued the "Prayer for the Restoration of Peace" on 3 March to be read in all churches during the Divine Liturgy, including in Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine. The prayer – in Church Slavonic – refers to the peoples of "Holy Russia", who come from "a single font of baptism under Holy Prince Vladimir" [of Kyiv, who brought Christianity to Rus] and asks that God "establish in their hearts the spirit of brotherly love and peace" and "thwart the intentions of foreigners who want to take up arms against Holy Russia".)

In another letter of 30 March, Metropolitan Mark also demands a written explanation within ten days of Fr Sergey's posts on his VKontakte page. Such posts included reposts of articles condemning the war in Ukraine from ahilla.ru – a website critical of the Moscow Patriarchate – and reposts "of a political character" (particularly one allegedly comparing President Putin to Hitler and another containing swear words).

"At present," the Metropolitan remarked, "it seems appropriate not to confuse the minds of people who are already in a state of depression, strong feelings, [and] mental pain, but on the contrary, as far as possible, share with them spiritual warmth, [and] console and support [them]. It is impossible now to make assessments of what is happening, because they will not be correct."

"Whether there was pressure on the bishop from the authorities, I don't know," Fr Sergey told Forum 18 on 7 May. Had he not stepped down as he did, he believes the diocese would have transferred him to another church where the senior priest would report to the bishop on his conduct, "that I didn't read the new 'Prayer for Peace', and so on", or "to live in some monastery as a reader, which I would have refused. That is, they would have rattled my nerves, and other people's, and it would all have ended the same way. I wanted it over as soon as possible, and not to have it turn into a circus."

In 2019, Fr Sergey was also among Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priests who signed an open letter in defence of people arrested during protests in Moscow (<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/09/17/82014-samo-pravosudie-prevrashaetsya-v-nasmeshku-i-massovyy-besporjadok>) against the authorities' refusal to register opposition candidates for local elections.

Deacon Dmitry Bayev wrote to the Vyatka Diocese on 25 February, asking to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat) until "the situation is settled", since "as a Christian holding the rank of deacon", he could not participate in services at which prayers were offered for the government and armed forces. He posted the letter to social media on the same day.

On 11 March, the Diocese banned him from serving on the grounds of three Apostolic Canons

(<http://www.voskrese.info/spl/aposcanon.html>), including Canon No. 25, which refers to being found guilty of "fornication, perjury, or theft" – despite the fact that Bayev had not yet been charged with any offence under secular law. The Diocese announced an ecclesiastical tribunal.

Forum 18 wrote to the Vyatka Diocese press office on 12 May, asking what the outcome of the church tribunal was, and why diocesan authorities had banned Bayev from serving in church under Apostolic Canon No. 25 when he had not committed any of the named offences and before any criminal case had been opened. Forum 18 received no reply by the middle of the working day of 13 May.

The Investigative Committee opened a case against Bayev on 23 March under Criminal Code Article 207. 3, Part 2, Paragraph d ("Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation based on political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or based on hatred or enmity against any social group").

It does not appear that this was because of any protests made on religious grounds, but as Current Time noted on 1 April, because of his vociferous general condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine, including comments that Ukrainian troops had "sent 17,500 orcs [a derogatory word for Russian soldiers] to the next world" and that Russian troops were "occupiers".

Bayev has also posted about the "Genocide of the population of Ukraine by Russian orcs" (with a series of pictures of destruction in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol), has called the FSB security service a "terrorist grouping", and is highly condemnatory of the Russian government and army and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Bayev is now outside Russia, he told Idel Realii on 12 April, and does not intend to return, "because I was given to understand that as soon as I cross the border in the opposite direction, they will immediately 'take me in'".

Religious leaders under pressure from the Government?

The degree to which state authorities are putting pressure on religious leaders and organisations at different levels is unclear. Asked whether Russian Orthodox diocesan authorities were acting autonomously in disciplining clergy over their views on the war, a priest told Forum 18 that "Russia has not been just taken over by enemies or extraterrestrials. Becoming a bishop can only be done by being willing to play by certain rules.. No special pressure [from the authorities] is needed here."

According to Archbishop Dietrich Brauer, head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia, the Presidential Administration issued a "clear demand" to all religious leaders to speak out in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Brauer gave a sermon in Moscow's Cathedral of St Peter and St Paul on 27 February, which consisted of thinly veiled criticism of the war (https://vk.com/dietrichbrauer?w=wall4574078_2279). He left Russia for Germany shortly afterwards and sees no possibility of return in the near future.

"I believe that under no circumstances is it appropriate to put pressure on religious leaders," Archbishop Brauer commented to independent Russian newspaper "Novaya Gazeta" on 22 March. "On the contrary, it is they who can become intermediaries in achieving sustainable peace."

In an interview with "Die Kirche" (a weekly church newspaper in Berlin and Brandenburg) on 14 April, Brauer said: "We are witnessing the blackmail of religion. But we shouldn't abandon the truth of the gospel, because then we have no future." He also noted that prayers in Russian churches cannot specify "that we have in mind the people in Ukraine, the images and horrors of the war".

Brauer described the invasion as "unimaginable" in an interview on 17 March with Magdalena Smetana, press officer of Württemberg Diocese. "We were not allowed to talk about the war, pray for peace, or contact our Ukrainian brothers and sisters," he said.

"The Presidential Administration made a clear demand of all religious leaders to speak out and support the war. Most did. [My] Catholic colleague refers to the Vatican and is silent, the Jewish chief rabbi, who also has American citizenship, found clever words. He called on everyone to work for peace. We could have joined that. I wanted to write a joint statement with all religious communities, but the others didn't agree. Together we could have made a difference.

"I clearly and publicly distance myself from this war, which is not just a war against Ukraine, but a war against humanity. It is not carried out in our name."

The website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia still lists Brauer as Archbishop, but notes that due to his absence, his duties are being carried out by Deputy Archbishop, Provost Vladimir Provorov.

An official statement issued by the Church in March (signed by Provorov) noted that "we feel united with our country" and "we pray for our people, for the well-being, freedom, wisdom and strength of our state". It goes on to acknowledge that parishioners "may

have different beliefs and views. The doors of our churches remain open to all. We regard all believers as brothers and sisters. At the same time, we avoid political discussions and splits in the communities."

"We deeply regret that people are now suffering and dying in Ukraine," the Lutheran statement continued, "and we call on politicians to reach a peaceful resolution to the conflict as soon as possible.. Despite all the political divisions in our societies, we feel our spiritual connection with our Ukrainian co-religionists and pray for the speedy onset of peace and that there will be no hatred, bitterness and confrontation between our peoples."

A Protestant pastor from a non-Lutheran denomination, who asked not to be identified, told Forum 18 that the security services are exerting pressure on religious communities at a local level. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, FSB officers in one city have visited at least two Protestant pastors for "prophylactic" conversations, warning them not to post material criticising the war on social media, or to speak out against it in church. The officers warned them that they could face prosecution if they did so and it would be better not to write or say anything about the war.

According to the pastor who spoke to Forum 18, the FSB security service has long shown interest in any Ukrainian connections churches may have, such as when the church received visitors from there.

After undercover officers went to one Protestant church in the Mari-El Republic in 2019, prosecutors charged both the church and a visiting Ukrainian musician with "unlawful missionary activity" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2594) under Administrative Code Article 5.26, Parts 4 and 5.

Roskomnadzor blocks information about Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) has blocked dozens of webpages, both Russian and foreign, which describe events in Ukraine as a "war", discuss Russian losses or alleged atrocities, or criticise the Russian government.

On 20 April, at the request of Russia's General Prosecutor's Office, Roskomnadzor blocked access to an article entitled "Russian troops purposefully destroy churches and places of worship in Ukraine", published by Belarusian news outlet "Brestskaya Gazeta" on 11 April. The article outlined the destruction of at least 59 places of worship as of 25 March, Christian (including those of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate), Jewish, and Muslim. It also noted the deaths of priests in Russian bombardments of Ukrainian towns and villages.

(As of 8 May, 116 places of worship and other religious buildings had been destroyed or damaged in Russian attacks, according to the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (<https://www.mkip.gov.ua/news/7118.html>).)

A few days later, the article disappeared entirely from "Brestskaya Gazeta"'s website. "Roskomnadzor demanded [that we] delete this article," staff at the newspaper told Forum 18 on 26 April. "Since the site is hosted in Belarus, we had to delete it." They did not explain why they had to abide by Roskomnadzor's demand, as the newspaper is registered and its website hosted outside Russia.

Roskomnadzor blocked another "Brestskaya Gazeta" article (about how to talk to relatives who do not believe in Russian atrocities in Ukraine) on 13 April, which has also been removed. According to GlobalCheck, which monitors internet censorship in Russia, "Brestskaya Gazeta"'s entire site is inaccessible in Russia, despite not appearing to be blocked as a whole by Roskomnadzor.

On 1 April, also at the request of Russia's General Prosecutor's Office, Roskomnadzor blocked a Russian-language appeal on the foreign Protestant website invictory.org by Valery Antonyuk, head of the All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists, to Protestant pastors in Russia, Belarus, and elsewhere.

Antonyuk talks about how Russian soldiers "destroy cities, wipe out villages, rob and rape" in Ukraine, condemns the silence of Evangelical leaders, and calls on them to speak out against the war: "Where are today's Niemöllers and Bonhoeffers in your churches?" he asks, in a reference to German pastors who opposed the Nazis. "Where are God's pastors who clearly call aggression – aggression, annexation – theft, and presidents who unleash bloody wars – criminals? .. Many Christians and their pastors, unfortunately, today believe more in the 'new bible', Russian TV, than in the testimonies of brothers and sisters in faith."

Roskomnadzor's demand to invictory.org - dated 26 March and seen by Forum 18 - describes Antonyuk's appeal as containing "untrustworthy" information which "may contribute to the destabilisation of the situation, as well as the creation of conditions for mass violations of public order and public security on the territory of the Russian Federation". Roskomnadzor demanded that the website take down the page within 24 hours and inform it when it had done so. Roskomnadzor warned that if the website failed to take down the material, it would be entirely blocked in Russia.

According to GlobalCheck, invictory.org is inaccessible in Russia, despite not appearing to be blocked as a whole by Roskomnadzor.

Forum 18 wrote to Roskomnadzor in the afternoon of the working day of 10 May, asking why it had blocked these webpages and on what grounds it could demand the removal of material from a site hosted abroad. Forum 18 received no reply by the middle of the working day of 13 May. (END)

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia
(<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>)

For more background see Forum 18's survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246), as well as Forum 18's survey of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

A personal commentary by the Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (<https://www.sova-center.ru>), Alexander Verkhovsky, about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments
(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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