

10 February 2023

RUSSIA: Fled fearing prosecution for preaching that war is "terrible"

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

Moscow Patriarchate priest Aleksandr Dombrovsky fled Russia in January, shortly after police told him the FSB had opened a criminal case against him. He had repeatedly preached against the war in Ukraine. "Everything related to my anti-war position was recorded in a most thorough manner," he told Forum 18. The criminal trial of Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov is due to resume in St Petersburg on 13 February. Fr Gleb Krivoshein became the first known person punished for signing an Orthodox open letter against the war.

A Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priest has been forced to leave Russia for fear of criminal prosecution over his opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Fr Aleksandr Dombrovsky, from Bryansk Region, went abroad in January, shortly after police told him that the Federal Security Service (FSB) had opened a case against him. He had repeatedly preached against the war in Ukraine in his sermons. "Everything related to my anti-war position was recorded in a most thorough manner," he told Forum 18.

Neither Bryansk Region police nor the FSB replied to Forum 18's questions asking on what basis and under which Article a criminal case had been initiated against Fr Aleksandr (see below).

A court in St Petersburg has extended the detention period of another Orthodox priest who opposed the war and is on trial accused under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov belongs to a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which did not join the Moscow Patriarchate with other parts of ROCOR in 2007 (see below).

Neither St Petersburg Investigative Committee nor St Petersburg City Prosecutor's Office have answered Forum 18's October 2022 questions as to what material forms the basis for the case against Fr Ioann, why the expression of religious views on war in general and in Ukraine is considered "false information" about the Russian armed forces, and why it was considered necessary to put him in detention. However, Darya Lebedeva, head of the joint court system press service for St Petersburg, insisted to Forum 18 that Fr Ioann had to be held in detention because: "if at liberty and not isolated from society, Kurmoyarov may continue his criminal activity, conceal himself from investigators and the court, destroy evidence and otherwise interfere with the criminal proceedings" (see below).

Despite the high likelihood of detention, administrative charges, and fines – and the danger of criminal prosecution if found to have "discredited" the Armed Forces more than once in a year – small numbers of Russians continue to protest against the war (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2788) on the basis of faith.

In September 2022, Fr Gleb Krivoshein, from the Tatarstan Republic, became the first known person to be prosecuted under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for signing the March 2022 open letter by Russian Orthodox clergy against the war (see below).

Neither the Tatarstan Republic Interior Ministry nor Kazan's Vakhitovsky District Court replied to Forum 18's questions as to why an open letter calling for reconciliation and an end to the war should be considered "discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces, and why Fr Gleb was prosecuted when the text of the open letter was published before Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 came into force (see below).

In February 2023, a protester in Vladivostok who quoted the Bible's Sixth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill") on his placard was briefly sent to a psychiatric clinic after he refused to answer questions about his actions. Police do not appear to have opened an administrative case against him (see below).

In January 2023, Russian independent media outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe was also fined 500,000 Roubles – the maximum penalty for a legal entity under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") – for its interview with Fr Andrey Kordochkin. He is a Madrid-based Moscow Patriarchate priest who has

consistently opposed the war, and was one of the authors of the March 2022 open letter from Orthodox clergy opposing Russia's war (see below).

Penalties for criticising Russia's actions in its war against Ukraine

New penalties for criticising Russia's actions in its war against Ukraine entered legal force as soon as President Vladimir Putin signed them into law on 4 March 2022. Among other changes was a new Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), which is used against apparently any form of anti-war statement either in public spaces or online, and the new Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

If individuals commit an offence covered by Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 more than once within a year, they may be prosecuted under the new Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security").

As of 16 January 2023, police had brought 5,601 prosecutions under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), according to the OVD-Info human rights news agency (https://data.ovdinfo.org/svodka-antivoennyh-repressiy-11?_gl=1*3pu54*_ga*MTUyMzYxODMyMS4xNjQ3NDk5Mzc3*_ga_J7DH9NKJ0R*MTY3NDc0MTg4Mi4zNC4xLjE2NzQ3NDMzNjMuNTEuMC4w), citing a figure from Mediazona.

Protesters – including those expressing views on the war based on their faith – may also face prosecution under various Parts of Administrative Code Article 20.2 ("Violation of the established procedure for organising or holding a meeting, rally, demonstration, march or picket").

Police and other investigative agencies also use other Criminal Code Articles against people protesting against the war – such as Article 213 ("Hooliganism"), Article 214 ("Vandalism"), and Article 318 ("Violence against the authorities") – but are not yet known to have done so to punish anyone protesting from a religious perspective.

Between 24 February 2022 and 23 January 2023, OVD-Info recorded (https://data.ovdinfo.org/svodka-antivoennyh-repressiy-11?_gl=1*3pu54*_ga*MTUyMzYxODMyMS4xNjQ3NDk5Mzc3*_ga_J7DH9NKJ0R*MTY3NDc0MTg4Mi4zNC4xLjE2NzQ3NDMzNjMuNTEuMC4w) 19,535 detentions of people protesting against the invasion of Ukraine and latterly against the "partial mobilisation" (announced on 21 September 2022).

As of 23 January, there had been 133 prosecutions under Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") and 42 prosecutions under Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security"), according to OVD-Info's figures (https://data.ovdinfo.org/svodka-antivoennyh-repressiy-11?_gl=1*3pu54*_ga*MTUyMzYxODMyMS4xNjQ3NDk5Mzc3*_ga_J7DH9NKJ0R*MTY3NDc0MTg4Mi4zNC4xLjE2NzQ3NDMzNjMuNTEuMC4w).

Opposition on a religious basis to renewed invasion of Ukraine

Russia's government has used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion of Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) from 24 February. These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who have publicly opposed the war. It is unclear what effect this has had on religious believers who may have considered making a public protest against the war. Similar warnings and prosecutions have been used against many Russians who express opposition to the war for any reason.

Among the thousands of Russians detained and taken to court for protesting against the war, a small number have done so from a religious perspective or using explicitly religious imagery (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2758). They have included Russian Orthodox priest Fr Ioann Burdin of the Moscow Patriarchate's Kostroma Diocese (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725), who was on 10 March fined one month's average local wages for online remarks and a Sunday sermon in church condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and stressing the importance of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill". Similarly, Moscow Patriarchate Deacon Sergey Shcherbyuk in Samara (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738) was also fined about one month's average local wages for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" in conversations with parishioners and colleagues. One of them apparently reported him to the Interior Ministry. Other Russian Orthodox priests have resigned from their posts and in some cases left the country

(https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741), after their opposition to the war brought them into conflict with their Moscow Patriarchate dioceses.

Many protestors such as Fr Burdin and Deacon Shcherbyuk have been fined under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), which along with other Administrative and Criminal Code changes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) was signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on 4 March 2022. Other cases under the Administrative Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2787) have followed.

Moscow Patriarchate priest forced to leave Russia

Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate priest Aleksandr Dombrovsky left Russia in January 2023 (<https://shaltnotkill.info/svyashhennik-aleksandr-dombrovskij-vojna-nozhom-proshla-po-kazhdomu-iz-nas/>), thinking that he would be prosecuted for preaching about "how terrible is war and how important is peace".

Until late 2022, Fr Aleksandr was Rector of the Church of St Nicholas the Miracle-worker in the village of Muzhinovo in Bryansk Region. In December, the Bryansk Metropolitanate banned him from serving as a priest and made him supernumerary [pochislit za shtat], ostensibly over "negligence" in relation to a fire which destroyed the church building.

Fr Aleksandr explained to Forum 18, however, that the diocesan authorities had earlier reprimanded him for his "dislike of Russia" and "threatened to defrock" him because of his preaching against Russia's war in Ukraine. The person whose negligence he blames for the fire later proved to be the person who made a statement against him to the police and FSB.

Late on 9 January 2023, local police "invited" Fr Aleksandr to the police station in nearby Kletnya, he told Forum 18 on 31 January, and informed him that the Bryansk Region branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB) had opened a criminal case against him.

The investigation was initiated on the basis of a statement from the churchwarden [starosta] of the Muzhinovo parish. She had apparently also provided investigators with "all my notes, correspondence, [and] voice messages, and even managed to record me in church on a dictaphone", Fr Aleksandr added. "Everything related to my anti-war position was recorded in a most thorough manner."

The police allowed him to leave after he wrote a statement. Faced with criminal prosecution, Fr Aleksandr decided to leave the country shortly afterwards, and is now "far from the Russian Federation", as he told Forum 18 on 9 February.

It is unknown under which article of the Criminal Code the FSB opened its case against Fr Aleksandr, but it is likely to be Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Criminal Code Article 280.3 punishes repeated "discreditation" of the Armed Forces. Fr Aleksandr has not been prosecuted under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Fr Aleksandr was born in the Odessa Region of Ukraine and he has immediate family in Kyiv, Dnipro, and Mykolaiv.

"It goes without saying that I made no secret of [what was happening to relatives in Ukraine]", Fr Aleksandr told Forum 18 on 31 January. "I actively preached in church against the war, talked with parishioners and others about atrocities and war crimes, [and] spoke about the need for peace. In social networks and in private correspondence, my position was exactly the same. I did not consider the genocide against the Ukrainian people a 'war against NATO', and always tried to call a spade a spade."

Fr Aleksandr described how, on 28 October 2022, Bishop Vladimir (Novikov) of Klinty and Trubchevsk Diocese (part of the Bryansk Metropolitanate) "reproached me for my dislike of Russia and asked me not to speak out on political topics in the future, because: 'The church is separate from the state'".

"However", Fr Aleksandr commented to Forum 18, "this 'separation' has not prevented Patriarch Kirill from blessing this war, passing off outright evil for patriotism."

The diocesan authorities asked Fr Aleksandr to write an "explanation" and threatened to remove his rank of priest: "I really tried for a while not to preach anti-war sermons, but it still didn't help me."

Muzhinovo's wooden church (and some other buildings in the village) burned down on 31 October 2022 after a power surge. Accusing Fr Aleksandr of negligence, the Diocese banned him from serving as a priest and made him "supernumerary" in mid-December, also citing his anti-war statements and – since there is nothing in canon law allowing the removal of priestly rank for criticising the secular authorities – his second marriage (which took place twenty years ago but was later annulled).

In a public post on 6 January in the VKontakte group of another parish of which Fr Aleksandr was the rector – St Elijah in the

village of Mirny - he noted that the fire service had found that the Muzhinovo church had caught fire because faults in its electrical wiring rendered it vulnerable to the power surge. He stated that all electrical work on the recently finished building had been organised by the churchwarden [starosta] – who, as he learned on 9 January, appears to have denounced him to the police and FSB for his anti-war sermons.

Forum 18 wrote to the Bryansk Region police and FSB before the start of the working day of 8 February, asking on what basis and under which Article a criminal case had been initiated against Fr Aleksandr. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Bryansk of 10 February.

Kurmoyarov: Criminal trial continues in St Petersburg

The only ongoing criminal trial for religious opposition to the war is that of Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov (born Dmitry Valeryevich Kurmoyarov, 8 January 1968) under Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

Fr Ioann – a member of a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia which is not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate – is on trial in St Petersburg (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2780) for posting videos on his YouTube channel in which he criticises the Moscow Patriarchate's support for the war, suggests the "aggressors" will not go to heaven, and argues that "Every condemnation of this aggression, this war on Ukraine, is a spiritual matter. All Christians should do it on principle."

Fr Ioann has so far undergone seven hearings at St Petersburg's Kalinin District Court. At the latest hearing, on 6 February, prosecutors requested time for expert analysis of another 57 videos from Fr Ioann's YouTube channel, and the judge extended his detention period to 28 May. He is next due to appear in court on 13 February.

St Petersburg Investigative Committee did not answer Forum 18's October 2022 questions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2780) as to what material forms the basis for the case against Fr Ioann, why the expression of religious views on war in general and in Ukraine is considered "false information" about the Russian armed forces, and why it was considered necessary to put him in detention. St Petersburg City Prosecutor's Office also did not answer Forum 18's questions, sent the same month.

Fr Ioann has been in detention at St Petersburg's Kresty prison since his arrest in June 2022 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2756). In August 2022, Darya Lebedeva, head of the joint court system press service for St Petersburg, insisted to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) that Fr Ioann had to be held in detention because: "if at liberty and not isolated from society, Kurmoyarov may continue his criminal activity, conceal himself from investigators and the court, destroy evidence and otherwise interfere with the criminal proceedings".

Belyayeva: Police looking for her, although she left Russia

Nina Belyayeva – a Baptist and Communist Party municipal deputy who is the subject of the only other (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") case initiated on the basis of religious opposition to the war – remains outside Russia.

Investigators also charged Belyayeva twice under Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 ("Public calls to carry out terrorist activities, made using the internet") because of interviews she had given to a "foreign blogger" in which she "publicly called for violent regime change in the Russian Federation".

Belyayeva left Russia in April 2022, shortly after the meeting of Semiluk District Council in which she denounced the invasion of Ukraine as a war crime (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737), stating that "murdering other people" and invading "the territory of another state, which has nothing to do with the goal of self-defence of one's own state" have "nothing in common with Christian beliefs".

In summer 2022, the Interior Ministry added Belyayeva to its wanted list. In August 2022, at the request of the Investigator (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2778), she was added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2687), blocking any bank accounts she might have in Russia.

On 27 January 2023, the Investigative Committee in Voronezh Region suspended its investigation on the basis that she had fled the country. Belyayeva stated on her Telegram channel on 1 February that the Criminal Investigation Department of the Semiluk District police had been instructed to find her.

Kazan: "Discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces

On 21 September 2022, a court in Kazan handed Fr Gleb Aleksandrovich Krivoshein, a Moscow Patriarchate priest from the city, a 15,000 Rouble fine under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737), Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). He was punished for signing an open letter against Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true).

The letter was made public on 1 March, and was signed by many Orthodox priests inside and outside the country (<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-orthodox-clerics-stop-war-ukraine/31730667.html>). It calls for "reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire", criticising the suppression of protests against the war, and stating that "we believe that the people of Ukraine should make their choice on their own, not at gunpoint, without pressure from West or East".

Several Moscow Patriarchate priests who signed the open letter soon requested to be made supernumerary (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) (pochislit za shtat), meaning that they remain priests but are not formally employed in a parish, cathedral, or other institution. Some also faced pressure from their dioceses, and were also prosecuted and fined (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763).

In its written verdict on Fr Gleb, seen by Forum 18, Kazan's Vakhitovsky District Court stated that he had "signed the open letter 'On the termination of the fratricidal war on the territory of Ukraine', posted on the Internet – that is, carried out public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens [and] maintain international peace and security, expressed in a public call to prevent the use of the Armed Forces for these purposes".

In court, Fr Gleb pleaded not guilty, arguing that the open letter was "not of a political nature, but a spiritual, religious one". Judge Dinar Khabibullin nevertheless found him guilty, deciding to impose a punishment of half the minimum fine, given that Fr Gleb has two underage children and it was his first offence.

Fr Gleb did not appeal against his conviction and appears to be still in post at the Church of the Yaroslavl Miracleworkers in Kazan's Arskoye Cemetery.

Forum 18 wrote to the Tatarstan Republic Interior Ministry and Vakhitovsky District Court on 8 February 2023, asking why an open letter calling for reconciliation and an end to the war should be considered "discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces, and why Fr Gleb was prosecuted when the text of the open letter was published before Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") came into force. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the Kazan working day on 10 February.

Fr Gleb's prosecution appears to be the first directly connected to the Orthodox priests' appeal against Russia's war in Ukraine.

"Legally and morally null and void"

On 18 January 2023, Tagansky District Court in Moscow fined the independent Russian news outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe 500,000 Roubles – the maximum for a legal entity under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737), Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). The news outlet was punished for an interview it carried out with one of the authors of the 2022 Orthodox open letter against Russia's war, Fr Andrey Kordochkin, dean of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Mary Magdalene in Madrid.

In comments on his Telegram channel on the day of the verdict, Fr Andrey himself called the case "legally and morally null and void, just like the laws that substantiate it".

No written verdict is yet available on the Moscow court system website, but Fr Andrey noted on his Telegram channel that he had read the investigation report and concluded that "it is not worth the paper on which I printed it. 'Undermining trust', 'diminishing authority', 'lowering a positive assessment', 'forcing negative meanings' – all these phrases can be applied to any critical statement".

Judges frequently use such phrases in Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") court verdicts to describe defendants' actions, Forum 18 has found.

The interview with Fr Andrey was published on the website of Novaya Rasskaz-gazeta (<https://novaya.media/articles/2022/10/24/protoierei-andrei-kordochkin-vlast-schitayet-chto-slovo-my-mozhet-proiznosit-tolko-ona>), the outlet's magazine, on 24 October 2022, the six-month anniversary of Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine.

In it, Fr Andrey discussed the relationship between church and state, the dangers of ignorance, the psychological effects of propaganda, the dilemma faced by those deciding whether to emigrate, and the atomisation of Russian society.

Fr Andrey criticised the "doctrinal basis" for the war – ie. the idea that Russians and Ukrainians are one people in one spiritual space, and in Patriarch Kirill's view, part of the same Church – as well as the Patriarch's pronouncement that "a person who goes to participate in hostilities and dies, faithful to the oath, is absolved of all sins".

"This is a concept that is actually based on nothing", Fr Andrey argued, but did not call it heresy, as he noted that heresy is only possible when there is theological thought: "Here, there is no theological thinking, there is simply an attempt to sacralise violence".

Fr Andrey goes on to cite Archbishop Benjamin (Peterson) of San Francisco (of the Orthodox Church in America), who commented that the Patriarch's view is "a new idea that has no justification in our theology", and that "a soldier who has committed a war crime and does not repent is more like a terrorist than a Christian martyr. After all, a martyr sacrifices his own life, not someone else's."

"It is hard to imagine a greater discreditation of the Russian army than to send it against a people called 'fraternal', forcing them to experience the same thing that was experienced by the peoples of the USSR during the Second World War," Fr Andrey commented on his Telegram channel on 18 January. "The blockade, evacuation trains, shelters in the subway and underground passages, children and old people in homes without heating and electricity."

"You can publicly declare the total spiritual and intellectual superiority of Russians over Ukrainians, you can publicly call for the burning and drowning of Ukrainian children, you can declare Ukraine a 'bastard state' and preach genocide and ethnic cleansing as part of its 'de-Ukrainisation', without fear of either administrative or criminal punishment. At the same time, the phrase 'no war', a poster with the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill [Ne ubiy]', or St Philip's words about innocently shed blood, or, in this case, an interview with a priest calling for the renunciation of violence, become the subject of a trial with a predetermined ending. Thus, Z-justice itself turns into a fake and with each unjust verdict goes to hell in the most direct and biblical sense of the word."

Fr Andrey added: "Let me remind you that according to the Fundamentals of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church cannot assist the state in waging an aggressive external war."

Fr Andrey announced on his Facebook page on 3 February 2023 that the Church had banned him from serving as a priest, though he did not give the reasons (in September 2022, the Church also removed him from his position as secretary of the Diocese of Spain and Portugal).

Novaya Gazeta Europe was launched in April 2022 in Riga. The long-running independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta suspended publication in Russia in March 2022, after the adoption of new laws on "discrediting" and disseminating "false information" about the Armed Forces.

Novaya Gazeta websites have been repeatedly blocked by Russian state media regulator Roskomnadzor, and its Russian media licence was withdrawn in September 2022. At present, Novaya.media (which published Fr Andrey's interview) and novayagazeta.ru are blocked, while novayagazeta.eu appears not to be.

Vladivostok: Protester taken to psychiatric clinic

On 8 February 2023, a man (named only as Aleksey by human rights group OVD-Info) stood in Vladivostok's Central Square, close to the Holy Transfiguration Cathedral, with a poster reading: "Thou shalt not kill [Ne ubivay]. The Bible. Deuteronomy 5:17".

Police officers detained Aleksey and took him away to give a statement. Three hours later, a psychiatric first aid unit [brigada psikhiatricheskoy pomoshchi] arrived at the police station; when he refused to answer their questions, they took him to a psychiatric clinic [psikhdispanser], where staff tried to establish what exactly he had wanted to say with the poster, OVD-Info reported the same day.

Aleksey was released from the clinic after two hours. No case under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") or any other Article yet appears to have been opened against him.

Moscow: Priest banned for praying for peace

The Moscow Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) has banned a priest from serving because he altered the wording of the Prayer for Holy Rus, which was issued by Patriarch Kirill on 25 September 2022 for obligatory use in all churches.

Fr Ioann Koval, of St. Andrew's Church in the Moscow district of Lyublino, was allegedly denounced by a parishioner for changing the line "Arise, O God, to help Thy people and give us victory by Thy power", to "Arise, O God, to help Thy people and give us

peace by Thy power".

A decree dated 2 February 2023 and signed by Patriarch Kirill bars Fr Ioann from serving as a priest until his case has been examined by the Moscow City Diocesan Council's Disciplinary Committee, the Moscow Diocese noted (<http://moseparh.ru/ukaz-u-0222-ot-2-fevralya-2023.html>). (END)

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

For background information, 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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