

21 November 2024

RUSSIA: Pentecostal pastor, Buddhist in pre-trial detention for anti-war remarks

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

Under arrest since 18 October, Moscow Pentecostal pastor Nikolay Romanyuk faces up to 6 years' imprisonment if convicted for preaching in September 2022 that believers should not go to fight in Ukraine "on the basis of Holy Scripture". His arrest came after early-morning armed raids on church members' homes. Under arrest since 22 June is Ilya Vasilyev, director of the Moscow Zen Centre. He is being prosecuted for an online post about Russian rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities which he made "solely out of religious conviction", his lawyer told Forum 18.

A Pentecostal pastor has become the first person to be accused of publicly calling for actions "against state security" for speaking out against Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective. Nikolay Romanyuk, senior presbyter of Holy Trinity Church in the Moscow Region town of Balashikha, gave a sermon in September 2022 in which he explicitly stated that believers should not go to fight in Ukraine "on the basis of Holy Scripture".

If convicted, Pastor Romanyuk could face up to 6 years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 1 million Roubles (7 months' average Moscow wage) (see below).

Investigators arrested Pastor Romanyuk after early-morning armed raids on his home and those of several other church members on 18 October 2024. Two days later, a court ruled that he should be detained for two months. He is currently being held in Investigation Prison No. 11 in Noginsk, 50 kms (30 miles) east of Moscow (see below).

Because the sermon was livestreamed and then uploaded to the church's YouTube channel, Pastor Romanyuk is under investigation under Criminal Code Article 280.4, Part 2, Paragraph V – "Public calls to implement activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation, or to obstruct the exercise by government bodies and their officials of their powers to ensure the security of the Russian Federation using mass media or electronic or information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet" (see below).

It remains unclear which investigative agencies carried out the raids on church members' home and initiated the criminal case against Pastor Romanyuk. Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee, the Moscow Region Investigative Committee, and the Moscow Region branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB). Forum 18 asked in what way Romanyuk's sermon threatened state security, why he had been placed in detention, whether any criminal or administrative cases had been opened against any other church members, and why it had been deemed necessary to carry out armed raids on their homes. Forum 18 has received no response (see below).

While Pastor Romanyuk is the first religious figure to be charged under Criminal Code Article 280.4, small numbers of Russians who oppose the war on religious grounds continue to face prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Criminal Code Article 280.3 ("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"), and Criminal Code Article 207.3 (dissemination of "false information" about the Armed Forces).

Ilya Vasilyev, founder and director of the Moscow Zen Centre, is due to go on trial soon on charges of spreading "knowingly false information" about the Russian Armed Forces "on grounds of hatred or enmity" (Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraph D). He is being prosecuted for an English-language Facebook post about Russian rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities. He made the post – and others for which he was previously prosecuted under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 – "solely out of religious conviction", his lawyer told Forum 18. If convicted, Vasilyev could be imprisoned for 5 to 10 years or be fined 3 million to 5 million Roubles (see below).

Vasilyev has been in detention since 22 June 2024, initially in Moscow's Kapotnya prison, then in Matrosskaya Tishina Investigation Prison (see below).

At a court hearing on 19 November 2024, where the judge extended Vasilyev's period in custody by six months, Vasilyev noted the difficulties of carrying out Buddhist rituals in the detention centre, but said in a message to supporters that he continues to meditate twice a week (see below).

On 12 November, a court in Moscow fined Russian Orthodox Christian Aleksey Sevastyanenko 5 days' average Moscow wage under Article 20.3.3 for accusing President Vladimir Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of murdering civilians in Ukraine. During his conversation with his church's pro-war priest, Sevastyanenko stated: "Thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house" (see below).

Forum 18 asked the Moscow Interior Ministry in what way Sevastyanenko's statements had "discredited" the Russian Armed Forces. Forum 18 received no response (see below).

Charges and punishments

President Vladimir Putin signed Criminal Code Article 280.4 into law on 14 July 2022. This was one of several new criminal offences (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) designed to discourage and punish criticism of the authorities in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Part 1 punishes "Public calls to implement activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation, or to obstruct the exercise by government bodies and their officials of their powers to ensure the security of the Russian Federation" with the following possible penalties:

– a fine of 100,000 to 500,000 Roubles;

– 2 to 4 years' imprisonment, with or without deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for up to three years.

Part 2 covers the same offence when committed "a) by a group of persons by prior conspiracy; b) by a person using their official position; v) using mass media or electronic or information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet; g) for selfish motives or for hire; or d) motivated by political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or motivated by hatred or enmity towards any social group", and carries the following punishments:

– a fine of 300,000 to 1 million Roubles;

– 3 to 6 years' imprisonment with or without deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for a period of up to 5 years and with or without restriction of freedom for a period of 6 months to 2 years;

On 4 March 2022, specific Criminal Code and Administrative Code penalties for "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces came into force (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), alongside criminal penalties for spreading "false information" about the Armed Forces' actions (Criminal Code Article 207.3). Some of the punishments were increased on 28 March 2023.

Although the government introduced Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 and the associated Criminal Code Article 280.3 on 4 March 2022 in order to punish "discreditation" of the Armed Forces, amendments to the law on 25 March 2022 expanded the definition of this offence to include "discreditation" of "the execution by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers for the specified purposes", ie. protecting Russian interests and "maintaining international peace and security".

The 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=2897). These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who have publicly opposed the war. Similar warnings and prosecutions have been used against many Russians who express opposition to the war for any reason.

Since February 2022, courts have on criminal charges jailed two and fined three (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904) for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds. Another, independent Christian preacher from the Urals Eduard Charov, is under restrictions at home awaiting criminal trial (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2925) on charges of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian armed forces and state bodies. Investigators have also opened three criminal cases against people who have left Russia. Many others have received administrative fines.

The government has blocked websites that oppose the war on religious grounds (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), and those that report on the impact of the war on people and places of worship in Ukraine. It has also blocked websites of Ukrainian religious organisations.

Romanyuk: "Activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation"

On 25 September 2022, at the first Sunday service after President Vladimir Putin announced the "partial mobilisation" of Russian army reservists, Pastor Nikolay Nikolayevich Romanyuk (born 15 August 1962) gave a sermon at the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Balashikha, calling on fellow believers not to take part in the war in Ukraine. Like other worship services at the church, the event was livestreamed on the church's YouTube channel and the recording was subsequently made available on YouTube and the Russian social network VKontakte.

In October 2024, investigators (it is unclear from which state agency) opened a case against Romanyuk under Criminal Code Article 280.4, Part 2, Paragraph V ("Public calls to implement activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation, or to obstruct the exercise by government bodies and their officials of their powers to ensure the security of the Russian Federation using mass media or electronic or information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet").

Investigators arrested Romanyuk – who studied at a Pentecostal seminary in Kyiv after the collapse of the USSR – on 18 October 2024 after searches of his home and those of other church members. At a closed hearing on 20 October, a judge at Balashikha City Court ordered that he should be kept in custody until 16 December (Romanyuk appealed unsuccessfully against the detention order on 12 November).

It is unknown whether Romanyuk has yet been formally charged or when his case is likely to come to trial. The Memorial Human Rights Centre named him a political prisoner (<https://memopzk.org/figurant/romanyuk-nikolaj-nikolaevich/>) on 31 October 2024.

Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee, the Moscow Region Investigative Committee, and the Moscow Region branch of the FSB security service, asking in what way Romanyuk's sermon threatened state security, why he had been placed in detention, whether any criminal or administrative cases had been opened against any other church members, and why it had been deemed necessary to carry out armed raids on their homes. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Moscow of 21 November.

Holy Trinity Church, which is a registered religious organisation, has several sister communities located in the outskirts of Moscow and Moscow Region. No other criminal cases appear to have been opened against any other clergy or church members so far.

Romanyuk: Simultaneous armed raids

Roman Zhukov, another pastor at Holy Trinity Church, described the early morning house raids on his Telegram channel on 24 October 2024 (https://t.me/zametki_o_zhizni_romana). "The conversation was softer with some, harsher with others," he noted. He wrote that "special forces soldiers" arrived at about 6.20 am on 18 October at his family's home, the Romanyuks', and the home of the Repins, another family from the church.

Officials also conducted searches at the church itself and "in Volokolamsk" (the church owns land in Volokolamsk District, where it runs children's camps).

At the home of Ilya and Sergey Romanyuk (who are among Nikolay Romanyuk's adult sons), the armed men did not carry out a search but "broke in and put the guys on the floor, where they lay for 12 hours, one and a half of which they spent in light indoor clothes and barefoot on the ground outside. At gunpoint".

At the other addresses, the troops "entered with armoured shields, in some cases breaking the door frames; they made the men lie on the floor with their hands behind their heads; [and] seized digital devices and documents, Maksim Repin's bank cards, his mother's pension card, and foreign-travel passports".

Investigators asked Nikolay Romanyuk "to make some statements on camera", which he refused to do. Investigators then took him away for questioning at about 6pm.

"The entire family has gone through great psychological trauma today, but such searches and arrests in modern Russia are predictable and expected – to our great regret", Ukrainian pastor Vladimir Franchuk, an acquaintance of the Romanyuk family, wrote in a blog post (<https://www.raulilehtonen.com/ru/2024/10/20/a%20d1%80%20b5%20d1%81%20d1%82%20be%20b2%20b0%20bd-%20b0%20d1%81%20d1%82%20be%20d1%80-%20be%20b1%20d1%89%20b8%20bd%20d1%8b-%20d1%85%20d1%80%20b8%20d1%81%20d1%82%20b8%20b0%20bd-%20b2%20b5%20d1%80%20d1%8b/>) on 20 October 2024.

"One of the main accusations against Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk is that he expressed his disagreement with the bandit-like and cruel war that the Russian Federation is waging on the territory of Ukraine", Franchuk noted. "Honourable and just people in Russia (believers and non-believers) suffer - and will suffer! - for their position as an honest person, which is deeply and consistently based on Biblical truth and the Christian worldview."

Romanyuk: "Find me in the Old Testament even a hint that we could somehow participate.. This is not our war"

The video of Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk's sermon has disappeared from the church's YouTube channel, but several other YouTube channels uploaded copies after the prosecution of Romanyuk became known. (Among these is the channel of Pastor Vyacheslav Boynetsky of the Slavic Christian Church in Salem, Oregon, who posted the sermon (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiUUJieRJ2o>) under the title "For this sermon they arrested a pastor".)

Much of the 41-minute video is taken up by Pastor Romanyuk's sermon, during which he says: "When you are offered a hit, when you are offered a bottle of alcohol or you are given a summons to send you to combat – this is the same sin, and the same drug, and the same Satan.. Find me in the Old Testament even a hint that we could somehow participate. And it does not matter which tsar calls for this – [whether] the Ukrainian tsar, the American tsar, or our tsar calls for this. I would like this to be a vaccination, at least in some way. This is not our war."

"It was written in our doctrine that we are pacifists and cannot participate in this", Romanyuk continues. "It is our right to profess this on the basis of Holy Scripture. We do not bless those who go there [to war]. [Those] who are taken by force, we do not bless them, but we pray that they are rescued from there. There are different legal ways to do this."

Nikolay Romanyuk is the brother of Vasily Romanyuk, who was pastor of the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church when the Moscow city authorities bulldozed its building (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1742) as an "unlawful structure" in 2012, forcing the congregation to split across different locations. Vasily Romanyuk died in 2015. The church managed to find a new site and construct a new building in 2016.

Pastor Romanyuk's address in detention is:

142412, g. Noginsk

ul. 1-ya Revsobraniy 17

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 11 UFSIN Rossii po Moskovskoy oblasti

Vasilyev: Criminal trial of Buddhist leader

The trial of computer programmer and Zen Buddhist Ilya Vladimirovich Vasilyev (born 9 December 1973) on charges of spreading "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces is due to begin in Moscow on 3 December 2024. It had earlier been twice postponed. He has been in detention since 22 June 2024, initially in Moscow's Kapotnya prison, then in Matrosskaya Tishina.

Before his prosecution, Vasilyev had been on the point of taking his vows as a monk of the Soto Zen school. He has been director of the Moscow Zen Centre since 2010, and held regular meditation sessions at his home.

Investigators opened the case against Vasilyev on 20 June 2024 under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information about 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, or about the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers outside the territory of the Russian Federation for those purposes, as well as [knowingly false information] on the provision of assistance by volunteer formations, organisations or individuals in the performance of tasks assigned to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or the troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation"), Part 2, Paragraph D ("for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity against any social group").

Criminal Code Article 207.3 Part 2 carries the following possible punishments: a fine of 3 million to 5 million Roubles; or up to 5 years' assigned work "with deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for up to 5 years"; or 5 to 10 years' imprisonment "with deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for up to 5 years".

According to the Investigative Committee charging decision of 16 October 2024, seen by Forum 18, the case is based on an English-language Facebook post of 25 December 2022: "Putin rejected Christmas armistice. His rockets are right now shelling peaceful Ukrainian cities and towns. Only yesterday 16 people died in Kherson, where my father's family lives. Or lived? Millions of Ukrainians are now without electricity and water supply".

The Paragraph D charge derives from Vasilyev's alleged motivation of "political hatred" for "the current organs of executive and legislative power of the Russian Federation".

Vasilyev made the post, and others on VKontakte which led to an earlier administrative conviction, "solely out of religious conviction", he told Forum 18 through his lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan on 20 November. He added that he is "not a politician and is engaged only in religion".

In a message to supporters, posted on the "Ilya Vasilyev – support group" channel (<https://t.me/dzenvnutrinias/34>) on Telegram on 20 November, Vasilyev wrote: "It is unacceptable to be persecuted for posting on the internet, but this is happening under the new laws of the Russian Federation. One day the world will be a better place!"

Vasilyev added: "On a brighter note, I am in Moscow. I continue to meditate on Monday and Wednesday evenings. One way to support me – meditate with me on Wednesdays from 18.00 to 18.30 Moscow time. Unite in person and via video link and our practice will help to manifest the good that already exists, both in us and in the world!"

Preobrazhensky District Court in Moscow scheduled the first hearing in Vasilyev's case for the 5 November, then for 19 November, but on both occasions Judge Valentina Lebedeva postponed it (in the latter case because Vasilyev was improperly notified of the hearing details). It is now due to take place on 3 December 2024.

At the 19 November hearing, the judge extended Vasilyev's period of detention by six months to 24 April 2025 – he has been in detention since 22 June 2024, initially in Moscow's Kapotnya prison, then in Matrosskaya Tishina. Vasilyev and his lawyer had requested that he be placed under house arrest instead. They noted that 8 December is the day of Buddha's enlightenment, which Vasilyev had wanted to mark at home.

Vasilyev: Earlier fine

Ilya Vasilyev appears to have first come to investigative agencies' attention in early 2023, either because of his religious activities or because he had "ended up on some list of unreliable Russians", as he commented to human rights group OVD-Info (<https://ovd.info/2024/10/01/russkaya-inkviziciya>) on 1 October 2024. The FSB security service examined his profile on the VKontakte social network on 4 February 2023, finding a number of anti-war comments.

Police searched Vasilyev's flat on 11 May 2023, seized his phone, tablet computer, and laptop, and took him to a police station. There they 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"). Moscow's Preobrazhensky District Court fined him 40,000 Roubles (1 week's average Moscow wage) the same day.

According to the written protocol detailing the charges, police based this case on three statements in Russian from Vasilyev's VKontakte page (which he used under the name "Arvi Hacker" ("Arvi Kheker")): "No to war with Ukraine. Shame on Putin's thugs"; "#notowar"; and "Russian army – out of Ukraine. Putin – out of the Kremlin! Russia did not choose you as president."

According to OVD-Info's 1 October 2024 account of his prosecution, after the administrative hearing, an investigator tried to question Vasilyev there and then in the court corridor about his activities on Facebook and Twitter. In response, Vasilyev cited Article 51 of the Constitution (according to which nobody is obliged to testify against themselves), then went home and deleted his social media accounts.

Investigators had already found, however, two Facebook posts which formed the basis of the case they eventually opened on 20 June 2024 (only one of which they later cited in the indictment). They searched Vasilyev's home and arrested him the same day.

Investigators sent the Facebook posts for psychological and linguistic examination by the "Independent Expert" centre, whose "expert analyses" have been used by the security services in similar cases against people who have spoken out against the war or otherwise opposed the authorities, including in the conviction of former Yekaterinburg mayor Yevgeny Roizman for "repeat discreditation" of the Armed Forces.

According to OVD-Info, Danila Mikheyev, the founder and sole employee of the "Independent Expert" centre, was apparently fighting in the Russian army in Ukraine when he supplied the "expert analysis" of the materials in Vasilyev's case.

(Russia's Justice Ministry has conceded that Mikheyev does not have the necessary qualifications for linguistic expert analysis. In July 2024, the Federal Tax Service removed the Independent Expert centre from the Unified Register of Legal Entities as inactive.)

Vasilyev's address in detention is:

107076 g. Moskva

ul. Matrosskaya Tishina 18

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 1 UFSIN Rossii po g. Moskve

Moscow: Another "discreditation" case

On 12 November 2024, Moscow's Basmany District Court fined 54-year-old Russian Orthodox Christian Aleksey Sevastyanenko 30,000 Roubles (5 days' average Moscow wage) under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). It is unknown whether or not he will appeal.

According to the written verdict, seen by Forum 18, on 10 November in the grounds of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Life-giving Trinity in Khokhly, Sevastyanenko "spoke out against the SVO [special military operation] and accused the President of the Russian Federation and the Patriarch of murdering the civilian population in Ukraine .. in this way, [he] committed public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for the purposes of defending the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] supporting international peace and security".

Sevastyanenko "adheres to an anti-war position", his lawyer commented to the "Ostorozhno, Moskva" Telegram channel (https://t.me/ostorozhno_moskva/18401) on 19 November. "That day, in the courtyard of the church, he raised this issue in the context of religious commandments". According to Radio Liberty's Russian Service (<https://www.svoboda.org/a/sud-ne-stal-rassmatrivatj-delo-moskvicha-zaderzhannogo-v-hrame/33198237.html>), he told the church's rector, Fr Andrey Tkachyov, that that support for the war in Ukraine goes against the commandments "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house".

Sevastyanenko believes a fellow parishioner or a member of church staff then called the police, who detained him for several hours before releasing him with a summons to appear the next day for charging.

On 11 November, police lodged a case against him under Article 20.3.3, Part 1 at Basmany District Court. Judge Anna Rasskazova sent it back the same day, however, as officers had not produced proof of the defendant's identity and had cited the wrong Administrative Code Article on a document in the case materials, according to court documents seen by Forum 18. Police resubmitted the case on 12 November, when the same judge found Sevastyanenko guilty.

Forum 18 asked the Moscow Interior Ministry on 18 November in what way Sevastyanenko's statements had "discredited" the Russian Armed Forces. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Moscow of 21 November.

Fr Andrey Tkachyov is known for his support of Russia's war in Ukraine (<https://www.svoboda.org/a/sluzhiteli-kuljta-stuchali-vsegda-sotsseti-ob-areste-prihozhnina-v-tserkvi/33196934.html>). The Moscow Patriarchate sacked and defrocked his predecessor at the Trinity Church, Fr Aleksey Uminsky, in January 2024 over his criticism of its pro-war stance and his refusal to read the "Prayer for Holy Rus" (Patriarch Kirill added this prayer to the liturgy after the invasion of Ukraine, to be read after the Gospel).

The Ecumenical Patriarchate later restored Fr Aleksey's priestly status and he is now serving at a Russian church in Paris (not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate). (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 Russia religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)

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)

Follow us on Bluesky @Forum18 (<https://bsky.app/profile/forum18.bsky.social>)

Follow us on X/Twitter @Forum_18 (https://x.com/forum_18)

Follow us on Facebook @Forum18NewsService (<https://www.facebook.com/Forum18NewsService>)

Follow us on Telegram @Forum18NewsService (<https://t.me/s/forum18newsservice>)

All Forum 18 material may be referred to, quoted from, or republished in full, if Forum 18 is credited as the source.

All photographs that are not Forum 18's copyright are attributed to the copyright owner. If you reuse any photographs from Forum 18's website, you must seek permission for any reuse from the copyright owner or abide by the copyright terms the copyright owner has chosen.

© Forum 18 News Service. All rights reserved. ISSN 1504-2855.

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY