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RUSSIA: Getting Alternative Civilian Service "a hellishly difficult task"

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

Military officials deny many young men Alternative Civilian Service (ACS), rather than military service, despite their demonstrating their pacifist convictions. A Krasnoyarsk Region court fined Baptist conscientious objector Zakhar Asmalovsky three weeks' average wages in November 2024. He is appealing against the conviction. German Strelkov, another Baptist, is on his fourth round of legal proceedings to try to realise his right to conscientious objection. "After the war began, the situation changed dramatically, and now it has become very difficult to obtain ACS," Seventh-day Adventist Andrey Bondarenko told Forum 18.

Military officials in Russia are continuing to deny many young men the opportunity to perform Alternative Civilian Service (ACS), rather than military service, despite their demonstrating their pacifist convictions to the military authorities.

If a Conscription Commission refuses ACS and the man does not appear when called up for military service, he is vulnerable to prosecution under Criminal Code Article 328 ("Evasion of conscription into military service in the absence of legal grounds for exemption from this service"). This can incur large fines or up to 2 years' imprisonment (see below).

A court in Krasnoyarsk Region found Baptist Zakhar Asmalovsky guilty under this Article in November 2024 and fined him 60,000 Roubles, about three weeks' average local wages. Krasnoyarsk Region Military Commissariat did not respond to Forum 18's questions, including why it had refused Asmalovsky ACS. The court did not respond to questions as to why it convicted him despite his requests for ACS (see below).

Conscripts who want to do Alternative Civilian Service (ACS) can be caught up in a cycle of repeated applications, refusals, and lawsuits which can last years, and may result in their being sent to military units anyway.

German Strelkov, another Baptist from Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District, has applied unsuccessfully for ACS at least three times. He is currently going through his fourth round of legal proceedings in his attempt to realise his right to conscientious objection (see below).

The authorities do not disclose the number of applications for ACS, but human rights defenders – including from Call to Conscience (<https://t.me/peaceplea/867>), and human rights group Citizen.Army.Law - think that the number is rising.

Sergey Krivenko, director of Citizen.Army.Law, thought in May 2024 that the numbers may have risen two or three times. Human rights defenders also think that Conscription Commissions are increasingly rejecting such requests, and courts in their turn are increasingly failing to uphold the right to alternative service on grounds of conscience (see below).

Both these trends appear to have resulted from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent mobilisation of reservists (men who have already completed conscript service) in 2022.

The numbers of those who are doing ACS have also significantly risen. According to Russian federal statistics, 1,199 young men were doing ACS in the first half of 2023, and by the first half of 2024 the number had risen to 2,022 (see below).

"After the war began, the situation changed dramatically, and now it has become very difficult to obtain ACS," a Seventh-day Adventist from Krasnodar Region, Andrey Bondarenko, commented to Forum 18 from outside Russia. He noted that even a staff member at the military registration and enlistment office had told him that "getting ACS is now a hellishly difficult task" (see below).

"In my opinion, the situation will only get worse, and if obtaining alternative service now is a lottery, where you can either get it or not, then soon it will be completely impossible to do," Bondarenko added (see below).

Many young men who apply for Alternative Civilian Service (ACS) are members of the Council of Churches Baptists, which has a

strong pacifist tradition. While the church does not formally oppose the undertaking of military service, when Baptist conscripts apply for ACS, church communities tend to support them in collating documents for the Conscription Commission and going to court if refused.

Other ACS applicants are known to come from the Seventh-day Adventist and other Protestant traditions and occasionally from Orthodox backgrounds, or describe themselves simply as Christian. Others are pacifists without a religious motivation.

Until their organisations were liquidated and their activities banned as "extremist" in 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses constituted approximately 60 per cent of applicants for alternative civilian service and were usually successful, Sergey Krivenko of the human rights group Citizen.Army.Law observed to Radio Liberty's Sibir.Realii (<https://www.sibreal.org/a/voenkomyat-rastsevivayut-eto-kak-ugrozu-v-rossii-na-40-vyroslo-kolichestvo-prohodyaschih-alternativnyu-grazhdanskuyu-sluzhbu/32942894.html>). Now, however, young Jehovah's Witness men risk investigation and prosecution for "continuing the activities of an extremist organisation" if they cite active involvement in their religious communities as evidence of their beliefs.

International human rights law

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, in General Comment 22 (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html>) on Article 18 ("Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion") of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>) (ICCPR), states that "the right to refuse to perform military service (conscientious objection)" derives from Article 18.

Similarly, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also states that conscientious objection to military service comes under ICCPR Article 18 and has recognised (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/conscientious-objection>) "the right of everyone to have conscientious objection to military service as a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

The OHCHR also notes in its Conscientious Objection to Military Service (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/special-issue-publications/conscientious-objection-military-service>) guide that Article 18 is "a non-derogable right .. even during times of a public emergency threatening the life of the nation".

In 2022 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated (WGAD-HRC50 (<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/WGAD-HRC50.pdf>)) that "the right to conscientious objection to military service is part of the absolutely protected right to hold a belief under article 18 (1) of the Covenant [the ICCPR], which cannot be restricted by States." The Working Group also stated that "States should refrain from imprisoning individuals solely on the basis of their conscientious objection to military service, and should release those that have been so imprisoned." Russia (as the Soviet Union) ratified the ICCPR in 1973.

Alternative Civilian Service: Background

All Russian men must carry out military service for 12 months between the ages of 18 and 30 (raised from 27 in January 2024). After this they are enrolled in the reserves (and thereby become subject to mobilisation – as occurred in autumn 2022). It is possible to gain exemption on medical grounds, or deferrals for medical or educational reasons and in certain family situations.

Conscripts also have the right, enshrined in the Constitution, "to replace [military service] with Alternative Civilian Service [ACS]", and instead work in a state or municipal institution, or in a civilian role in the armed forces, for a longer period.

As yet, the explicit right to Alternative Civilian Service exists only for conscripts, with no equivalent provided for in law for mobilised men. Some have been able to avoid mobilisation to fight in Ukraine by applying for ACS anyway.

Applicants for ACS who are not from Russia's indigenous peoples must demonstrate that military service is contrary to their beliefs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881). Under the 2002 Law on Alternative Civilian Service, "Citizens who have expressed a desire to replace conscripted military service with Alternative Civilian Service must substantiate [their claim] that military service is contrary to their beliefs or religion", and set out "the reasons and circumstances [prichiny i obstoyatelstva] that prompted [them] to apply for this".

If a Conscription Commission does not accept that a conscript genuinely holds such beliefs, then it can refuse his application.

Russian and international human rights bodies - including the Movement of Conscientious Objectors (<https://stoparmy.org/>) and the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection (<https://ebco-beoc.org/russia>) - argue that such procedures are often not carried out fairly or independently. Military officials put undue pressure on ACS applicants, and decisions are largely taken by military commissars, despite Conscription Commissions being ostensibly independent organs chaired by local civilian officials.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, stated in her 28 October 2024 report (A/79/508 (<https://undocs.org/A/79/508>)) that "torture and ill treatment have been used by Russian army commanders against conscientious objectors, mobilized men and regular servicemen who refuse to obey orders to fight against Ukraine".

Katzarova called on the Russian authorities to "Guarantee consistent application of the process for the evaluation of citizens requesting to undertake alternative civilian service".

The Conscription Commission may refuse an application (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) if: a) the deadline is missed or the procedure incorrectly followed; b) the submitted documents and other information "are not in accordance with the citizen's arguments that military service is contrary to his beliefs or religion"; c) the submitted information is false; d) the individual has twice failed to appear at meetings of the Conscription Commission; e) an individual has previously been granted ACS and has failed to do it.

Russia's Constitutional Court ruled on 17 October 2006 that a missed deadline should not be grounds for outright refusal to consider a request for ACS on its merits. This remains, however, the most common reason for denying ACS. The conclusion that an individual's submitted information does not back up his professed beliefs is the second most common reason.

If an applicant is unsuccessful, he can either appeal to a higher-level Conscription Commission or file an administrative lawsuit at a district-level court, requesting that the Conscription Commission's decision be ruled unlawful.

Going to court means that the implementation of the Conscription Commission's decision is suspended until the court's decision enters into legal force. If a lawsuit is initially unsuccessful, the plaintiff has one month to appeal, and the decision does not enter legal force before the appeal ruling. It is therefore likely that the call-up period will end before the lawsuit is resolved, meaning that the individual is not liable to be conscripted immediately even if his legal challenge fails. He can then make a new application for alternative service in the next call-up period.

Alternative Civilian Service increasing in popularity?

On 1 January 2024, an amendment to the Law on Military Service came into force which raised the upper age limit for conscription from 27 to 30, thus creating a much larger pool of potential conscripts (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881). The lower limit remains at 18.

According to Russian federal statistics, 1,645 young men were doing Alternative Civilian Service (ACS) in the second half of 2023. This was a 37 per cent increase on the 1,199 young men doing ACS in the first half of 2023. It was also the first time the figure had exceeded 1,200 since records began in 2013, from which the average number to 2024 was about 1,150 young men doing ACS. In the first half of 2024, the number rose again to 2,022. (This data is published with a six-month delay, so the first half of 2024 is the latest period for which figures are available.)

No statistics are available on the filing of applications for ACS, but "our feeling is that the number of people interested in this has increased two to three times", Sergey Krivenko, director of human rights group Citizen.Army.Law, commented to Radio Liberty's Sibir.Realii on 14 May 2024 (<https://www.sibreal.org/a/voenkomy-rastsenivayut-eto-kak-ugrozu-v-rossii-na-40-vyroslo-kolichestvo-prohodyaschih-alternativnuyu-grazhdanskuyu-sluzhbu/32942894.html>).

(Citizen.Army.Law informs conscripts of their rights and helps them prepare applications for alternative civilian service. The Justice Ministry added the organisation to its register of foreign agents on 3 December 2021.)

Despite the rise in the number of applications, "We see a negative trend, when both Conscription Commissions and courts are increasingly trying to refuse citizens in their desire to undergo ACS, and refuse them without reason", Krivenko noted.

According to Krivenko, ACS numbers are possibly under 0.1 per cent of the entire conscription cohort, "but for some reason, military registration and enlistment offices regard this as a threat", particularly since the invasion of Ukraine.

Krivenko thinks that rising interest in the alternative service option is because of the "high risks for conscripts" – that they will be coerced into signing a contract, or sent to guard border areas, where they may be subjected to Ukrainian shelling or cross-border raids by Russian troops fighting on the Ukrainian side.

Criminal prosecution of Zakhar Asmalovsky, Krasnoyarsk Region

Baptist Zakhar Igoryevich Asmalovsky, from Krasnoyarsk Region, has applied for Alternative Civilian Service three times since September 2023. Officials have refused every application. After he did not turn up when summoned by the military registration and enlistment office, Berezovka District Court fined him 60,000 Roubles (about three weeks' average wages in Krasnoyarsk Region)

under Criminal Code Article 328, Part 1 ("Evasion of conscription into military service in the absence of legal grounds for exemption from this service") on 29 November 2024. Asmalovsky has lodged an appeal.

"We testify to the faith of our brother Zakhar, [and] his beliefs, and are ready to speak for him in court, about which written testimony was also prepared", Council of Churches Baptists noted on Telegram on 27 September 2024 (https://t.me/novosti_MSZ_EHB/9265), before Asmalovsky's criminal conviction. "We ask you to pray for him that God will help him remain faithful, grant him spiritual strength and wisdom to maintain his Christian testimony before the world, and also for the mercy of the Lord when his [criminal] case is heard in court."

Asmalovsky has twice challenged military officials' refusal to allow him ACS in court. His first administrative lawsuit was unsuccessful at Berezovka District Court on 7 September 2023 and he appealed unsuccessfully (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) at Krasnoyarsk Regional Court on 24 November 2023. After the Conscription Commission again denied Asmalovsky ACS in the spring of 2024, Berezovka District Court refused to uphold his second lawsuit on 27 May 2024 (unsuccessful appeal on 13 August 2024).

Asmalovsky later made a third application for ACS – with this one, he missed the deadline, a fellow Baptist told Forum 18 on 4 December 2024. He does not appear to have lodged another administrative suit.

Having considered Asmalovsky's first lawsuit, the District Court judge concluded that neither Asmalovsky's autobiography nor the reference from his place of study "indicates that [his] beliefs and religion preclude conscripted military service" and "the mere fact that he is a believer and attends church cannot serve as an unconditional basis for replacing his military service with Alternative Civilian Service".

In spring 2024, Asmalovsky "went away and did not appear when summoned", his fellow Baptist explained to Forum 18. Prosecutors then charged him under Criminal Code Article 328, Part 1 ("Evasion of conscription into military service in the absence of legal grounds for exemption from this service").

This carries the following possible punishments:

- a fine of up to 200,000 Roubles;
- up to 2 years' assigned work (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897);
- up to 6 months' "arrest" (defined by Criminal Code Article 54 as "holding the convicted person in conditions of strict isolation from society"); or
- up to 2 years' imprisonment.

Forum 18 wrote to Krasnoyarsk Region Military Commissariat on 14 January 2025, asking:

- why it had denied Asmalovsky's requests for Alternative Civilian Service (ACS);
- what he should do to realise his constitutional right to ACS;
- why he was subject to criminal prosecution;
- and whether he would now be liable for conscription in the spring 2025 call-up.

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Krasnoyarsk Region of 24 January.

Forum 18 also asked Berezovka District Prosecutor's Office and Krasnoyarsk Regional Prosecutor's Office why prosecutors had opened a criminal case against Asmalovsky and whether he would now be liable for conscription.

Berezovka District Prosecutor Aleksey Nosovets replied on 22 January 2025. He confirmed that his office had opened a criminal case against Asmalovsky on 17 May 2024 but did not explain the reasons. He noted that individuals with unspent or unexpunged convictions are not subject to conscription.

Berezovka District Court registered the criminal case against Asmalovsky on 31 May 2024. After six hearings, Judge Artur Nikitin found him guilty on 29 November 2024 and fined him 60,000 Roubles. Asmalovsky lodged an appeal on 10 December 2024. Krasnoyarsk Regional Court has not yet listed any hearings.

If Asmalovsky's criminal conviction enters legal force, he will have an active criminal record (sudimost) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) for one year after he pays his fine. During this time, he cannot be called up

for military service.

Forum 18 asked Berezovka District Court why it had found Asmalovsky guilty, given that he had submitted several requests for Alternative Civilian Service. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Krasnoyarsk Region of 24 January.

German Strelkov, Khanty-Mansi: Multiple lawsuits, still no ACS

Baptist German Aleksandrovich Strelkov, from Khanty-Mansiysk, appears to have made four applications for Alternative Civilian Service (ACS). Military officials rejected all of them (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881), despite his providing evidence of his pacifist beliefs. He lodged administrative lawsuits challenging these decisions, but Khanty-Mansiysk District Court refused to uphold any of them. He now has until 28 January 2025 to file an appeal against the most recent court decision.

Baptist Council of Churches brothers German and Daniil Aleksandrovich Strelkov first requested ACS in autumn 2023. Khanty-Mansiysk Military Commissariat and Conscription Commission rejected their applications. Khanty-Mansiysk District Court rejected their legal challenges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) on 27 November 2023, despite both brothers providing evidence of and witnesses to their Christian pacifist beliefs. Neither appears to have appealed.

According to court records, Daniil Strelkov lodged no further lawsuits. It is unclear whether he was subsequently successful in realising his right to ACS, or whether he is now performing military service.

The Khanty-Mansiysk military authorities continued to deny German Strelkov's repeated applications for ACS. He was unsuccessful in challenging these refusals on 23 May 2024, with unsuccessful appeals on 10 September 2024 at the Court of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) and on 24 December 2024. He withdrew another lawsuit from consideration on 20 November 2024, apparently in advance of a further meeting of the Conscription Commission. This nevertheless rejected his latest application on 26 November.

According to the 24 December court decision, seen by Forum 18, the Khanty-Mansiysk Conscription Commission refused to allow German Strelkov to do ACS on the grounds that the information he had submitted did not support his argument that military service would go against his beliefs.

"From the documents submitted by the administrative plaintiff .. it does not objectively follow and is not discernible that G.A. Strelkov actually has stable convictions, confirmed by his way of life [and] the nature of his social behaviour, over a significant period of time, which conflict with military service," Judge Valery Cherkashin concluded.

German Strelkov explained in his application (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) that he had become a Christian at the age of 15, attends a Baptist Council of Churches church, and refuses to take up arms or study military matters, and included a petition from members of his church and testimonials from four fellow Baptists. Council of Churches Baptists have a strong pacifist tradition.

Despite this, Judge Cherkashin decided that the application did not "contain information indicating the formation of sincere and deep convictions in the applicant that make it impossible for [him] to perform military service".

Judge Cherkashin characterised German's repeated unsuccessful requests for ACS and the court's previous rulings against him as "aimed at abusing the right to judicial protection, as well as the right to lodge an application for ACS".

Before the beginning of the working day of 24 January, Forum 18 asked Judge Cherkashin in writing why he had dismissed German Strelkov's evidence of and witnesses to his deeply-held Christian pacifist beliefs, and had refused to allow him to undertake ACS. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the court's working day in Khanty-Mansiysk of 24 January.

Khanty-Mansiysk District Court had on 28 November granted German Strelkov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) a "preliminary protection measure" suspending his conscription until any court decision came into force. Judge Cherkashin nevertheless overturned this in the 24 December ruling. The ruling is due to come into force one month after publication of the full written verdict, i.e. 28 January, if no appeal is lodged.

Forum 18 has repeatedly asked the Khanty-Mansiysk Military Commissariat (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2881) why it has repeatedly refused to allow German Strelkov to do Alternative Civilian Service (ACS), and what else he would need to include in his application in order to realise his right to ACS. Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in Khanty-Mansiysk of 24 January.

Andrey Bondarenko, Seventh-day Adventist, Sochi

Andrey Ilyich Bondarenko is a fifth-generation Seventh-day Adventist from the Black Sea city of Sochi. Adventists have a

long-standing strong pacifist tradition. Officials refused Bondarenko Alternative Civilian Service (ACS) in April 2023 on grounds of missing the application deadline. The refusal came despite the Constitutional Court's 2006 ruling that this should not be a reason for not considering an application on its merits.

Bondarenko's treatment at Sochi's military commissariat attests to the increasing difficulty conscripts have been facing in attempting to realise their right to ACS in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and to the aggressive attitude held by many officials towards "non-traditional" religious denominations.

Bondarenko, an undergraduate student, had an academic deferral from military service. This became invalid, however, when he transferred from one institution to another in 2022, as a result of a mistake by his first university. After his subsequent unsuccessful request for ACS, the academic deferral was reinstated once the universities clarified the matter with the military authorities. Nevertheless, the military authorities told Bondarenko he would have to return to the military commissariat in September 2023.

"Being on the watchlist of the Russian authorities and the military registration and enlistment office, I fled from this 'Evil Empire' [Russia] at the first opportunity, without waiting for the date indicated on the summons," he explained to Forum 18 in January 2025. He and his family are now seeking asylum abroad.

Upon applying for ACS, Bondarenko underwent a medical examination. Despite his having two "significant" health issues, military medics passed him at the highest fitness level. Like other conscripts, he also had to see a psychologist.

"It was interesting to watch how, with all the guys ahead of me, [the psychologist] asked only a few basic and standard questions, like 'Do you have depression?', 'Do you have suicidal thoughts?' and after that he filled out the form and sent them away," Bondarenko told Forum 18.

"And when it was my turn, he opened the computer (with information about me, as I understand it), his face changed greatly, and he began to ask me in a rude tone why I was a sectarian, why I didn't love my Motherland, whether I was an agent of Israel and the USA, and that THEY (the military registration and enlistment office) knew for sure that I was," Bondarenko added.

"This nonsense continued for so long that a crowd of people formed around us, who watched this very strange process with interest. After an overly long interrogation, he shoved a piece of paper at me and let me leave the office."

Bondarenko nevertheless thought that he would be allowed to undertake ACS, given that other young men from his church had succeeded in doing so (including those who had missed the application deadline). They, however, had applied before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This was a time when, in Bondarenko's view, ACS was "quite easy to obtain, since the state did not create any obstacles to it, as a result of the fact that .. officials simply had no time for this – they calmly took bribes, stole from state programmes and state orders, and did not particularly create obstacles to the observance of civil rights".

After the war began, "the situation changed dramatically", Bondarenko thinks. "Even the woman at the military registration and enlistment office who helped me collect the documents said that now getting ACS is a hellishly difficult task."

In online chats and communities for ACS applicants, "everyone noticed the same thing: that a huge number of people were denied [ACS], and precisely at the beginning of the war", Bondarenko observed to Forum 18. "Often, an attempt to send a person to war by the state is connected precisely with his political opinion, and anti-war activities, as well as his 'non-traditional religion', as it was with me."

Bondarenko described his experience at the meeting of the Conscription Commission on 4 April 2023 in an account for Christians Against War on 26 November 2024 (<https://shaltnotkill.info/ags-v-rossii-vo-vremya-vojny-opyt-adventista/>).

A Federal Security Service (FSB) Colonel ("spitting all over the office in the heat of anger", as Bondarenko later told Forum 18) "took my folder of papers and contemptuously threw it on the edge of the table, telling me that he would not read it, and shouted, literally: 'What kind of scum have we raised over 30 years of democracy that does not want to defend the Motherland! Explain to me what is wrong with going and killing those who have encroached on the Orthodox Church in Ukraine? Now you, a sectarian, will go to defend and fight for the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, for 200,000 Roubles. You have been denied alternative service, you will go to war as a normal soldier'."

The minimum monthly salary for a Russian soldier fighting in Ukraine is approximately 200,000 Roubles.

All the other men who requested ACS on the same day (apparently on grounds of non-religious pacifist beliefs) also had their applications for ACS refused, Bondarenko noted.

Bondarenko received a document, seen by Forum 18, refusing him ACS on grounds of missing the deadline. The Conscription

Commission told him to report to a military commissar for a summons to military service on 11 April 2023. The missed deadline, Bondarenko observed to Forum 18, is the "most convenient way" to refuse ACS: "Considering that I was literally dragged to the military registration and enlistment office in the middle of the academic year, I physically could not submit an application on time, so such a response was a really vile bureaucratic trick."

The military commissar initially would not consider delaying the summons to allow Bondarenko either to finish the academic year or have the necessary treatment for his medical conditions. He also attempted to discourage him from going to court, since he "would be drafted into the army right from the courtroom", Bondarenko wrote in his account for Christians Against War.

Despite this, the commissar then agreed not to issue a summons for 11 April 2023 and gave Bondarenko a few days to get his academic deferral reinstated. Bondarenko's original university eventually did this, but "Having seen the hand of God in receiving this deferral, we did not hesitate any longer, realising that in September I could be drafted into service, and if they did not draft me in September, they would draft me later and certainly to war, as this FSB officer had promised". Bondarenko left the country later in 2023 with his family.

Forum 18 wrote to Sochi City Conscription Commission on 17 January 2025 to ask:

- why it had denied Bondarenko alternative civilian service for missing the application deadline when the Constitutional Court has ruled that this should not be a reason for refusal; and

- why Bondarenko had been subjected to derogatory remarks about his religious affiliation by both the psychologist and a member of the commission.

Forum 18 had received no reply by the afternoon of the working day in Sochi of 24 January 2025.

Russia "does not care about the law and the Constitution in which civil rights are written"

"I had to endure all this only because I am a Protestant," Seventh-day Adventist Andrey Bondarenko told Forum 18. He noted that "After the war [against Ukraine] began, we saw the acceleration of long-running processes that first of all hit civil rights and freedoms .. a systematic return to the times of the USSR."

While before it was possible to realise one's right to Alternative Civilian Service, now "Russia needs soldiers, and it absolutely does not care about the law and the Constitution in which civil rights are written," Bondarenko commented. "Everyone who can be mobilised for war, and often Protestants are deliberately forced to take up arms, knowing that they cannot do so."

Bondarenko added that some churches fear "a complete ban as happened to Jehovah's Witnesses", and therefore shy away from helping their church members.

(Russia's Supreme Court banned all Jehovah's Witness activity (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) as "extremist" in 2017. Courts have since then convicted hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2916) on "extremism"-related criminal charges, handing down long jail terms, suspended sentences and fines.)

Bondarenko thinks the situation will only get worse. "If now getting alternative service is a lottery, where you can either get it or not, then soon it will be completely impossible to do," he told Forum 18. "And the proof of this is in the war. There are thousands of photos on the Internet of the so-called 'torture pits' into which Russian soldiers who refuse to take up arms are thrown, where they sit for weeks without food and endure torture and beatings. All that remains is to pray to God that he intervenes and resolves this situation."

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, stated in her 28 October 2024 report (A/79/508 (<https://undocs.org/A/79/508>)): "At least 15 unofficial places of detention exist close to the front line where hundreds are kept and subjected to torture to punish them." (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)

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