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RUSSIA: Multiple trials, convictions, for criticising invasion of Ukraine

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

Christian preacher Eduard Charov's trial for repeatedly allegedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces and state bodies is due soon. Buddhist Ilya Vasilyev is on trial for allegedly spreading "knowingly false information" about the Armed Forces "on grounds of hatred or enmity". Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk, tortured while arrested, is under investigation for preaching that "on the basis of Holy Scripture" Christians should not fight in Ukraine. On 27 January, Christian bard Andrey Buyanov received possibly the largest total fine yet for criticising from a religious perspective Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The trial of an independent Christian preacher for repeatedly allegedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces and state bodies is due to begin soon at a court in the Urals. The 53-year-old Eduard Charov, who runs a shelter for homeless people, is currently under a ban on leaving his home district and using the telephone and internet. He and his wife think he will be sent to prison.

Charov first faced administrative prosecution in the spring of 2023 for comments on social media, including the remark addressed to "church people": "would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!". His second alleged "discreditation" offence, for which he is about appear in court, involved reposting a quotation about patriotism which makes no mention of the Russian military or government: "A patriot is someone who wants to make their country better, the people richer, and the government more honest and fair. Not someone who justifies total destitution and corruption with imaginary greatness and spiritual bonds" (see below).

On 28 January, Sverdlovsk Region Prosecutor's Office issued its final indictment charging Charov for "public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" more than once in a year, and "public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet". The latter charge is for what Charov's wife Inna called a "sarcastic comment" on another user's post on the VKontakte social network in September 2023 (see below).

Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee has refused to reply to Forum 18's questions about the case (see below).

Two other criminal cases are ongoing against individuals who have opposed Russia's war against Ukraine from a religious perspective. The 51-year-old Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev is currently on trial in Moscow on charges of spreading "knowingly false information" about the Russian Armed Forces "on grounds of hatred or enmity" (see below).

Vasilyev, who has been in detention since 22 June 2024, 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 administratively prosecuted – "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. He is next due to appear in court on 11 February 2025 (see below).

Moscow City Prosecutor's Office has not replied to Forum 18's questions about the case (see below).

In October 2024, a Moscow Region Pentecostal pastor became the first person to be accused of publicly calling for actions "against state security" for speaking out against Russia's war against Ukraine from a religious perspective (see below).

Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk, who is now 62, preached a sermon in September 2022 in which he explicitly stated that, "on the basis of Holy Scripture", Christians should not go to fight in Ukraine. Because the sermon was livestreamed and then uploaded to his church's YouTube channel, he is under investigation for "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 use of mass media, or electronic, or information and telecommunication networks, including the internet" (see below).

Armed men raided Pastor Romanyuk's home and those of several other church members on 18 October 2024. While arresting Romanyuk, the armed officials tortured him by striking him on the side of the head, causing fluid to leak from his ear, his daughter Svetlana Zhukova stated (see below).

It is unclear which security agencies carried out the raids and which is investigating Pastor Romanyuk's case. None of the Moscow Region branches of the Investigative Committee and the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Investigative Committee, nor the Moscow Region National Guard (Rosgvardiya) has replied to Forum 18's questions about the case (see below).

On 27 January 2025, 44-year-old Christian bard and songwriter Andrey Buyanov received what appears to be the largest total fine yet for criticising Russia's war against Ukraine from a religious perspective. Moscow's Nagatino District Court issued 10 separate guilty verdicts on charges of "Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" for different posts Buyanov made on VKontakte between June 2023 and March 2024. The posts included anti-war songs and poems, reposts of other users' material, and observations on opposition politician Aleksey Navalny's funeral (see below).

In the written court decisions, seen by Forum 18, the amount of each fine is redacted. For this offence, possible fines range from 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles, meaning that Buyanov could have been fined anything from 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles overall. A fine of 300,000 Roubles would represent about 2 months' average wage in Moscow (see below).

The posts which led to Buyanov's multiple prosecutions were found during internet monitoring in December 2024 by the Interior Ministry's Counter-Extremism Centre, which described them as "extremist materials". They included poems and songs, mostly of his own composition and all critical of Russia's war against Ukraine. For example, on 1 March 2024, Buyanov made "a post supporting [Aleksey Navalny] with condemnation of the actions of the Russian Armed Forces during the Special Military Operation", one verdict stated, with two photos "showing a church near which people have gathered for the purpose of holding a mass protest against the activities of the Russian Federation" (see below).

Buyanov wrote: "I admire the People who were not afraid and came to the funeral service and burial of [Navalny]. It's a symbolic video – against the backdrop of a church, People chant what should have been heard in churches all these 2 years: 'No to war!' But it is not heard. The voice of God, banished from the churches.." (see below).

Moscow's Nagatino District Court has not replied to Forum 18's questions about the case.

Charges and punishments

Soon after Russia launched its renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Vladimir Putin introduced new offences in order to prosecute those opposing the war for any reason, including on religious grounds.

These included – but were not limited to – Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) and the associated Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) introduced on 4 March 2022 to punish alleged "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 jailed two and fined three (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904) on criminal charges for opposing Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds. Investigators have also opened three criminal cases (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904) against people who have left Russia, and have placed them on the Federal Wanted List (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897).

Many others who publicly or online protested against the war (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835) have been fined under the Administrative Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). Repeat anti-war "offences" can lead to prosecution under the Criminal Code (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), which brings the possibility of jail terms.

Ever-increasing internet censorship has seen websites and materials blocked (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2934) for: "extremist" content; opposition to Russia's war against Ukraine from a religious perspective; material supporting LGBT+ people in religious communities; Ukraine-based religious websites; social media of prosecuted individuals; and news and NGO sites which include coverage of freedom of religion or belief violations.

Eduard Charov: Prosecutors send case to court

On 28 January, Sverdlovsk Region Prosecutor's Office issued its final indictment in the criminal case against independent Christian

preacher Eduard Aleksandrovich Charov (born 18 July 1971).

The document, seen by Forum 18, indicates that prosecutors have charged Charov under both Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" more than once in a year) and Criminal Code Article 205.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 2 ("Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet"). Penalties under both these Criminal Code article range from very large fines up to 7 years' imprisonment, and any conviction is also followed by a range of possible other penalties.

Under Criminal Code Article 69, if a person is found guilty of more than one crime in the same court process, the judge will decide on separate punishments for each, then add them together partially or in their entirety to form an aggregate sentence.

Investigative Committee officials had summoned Charov for questioning on several occasions in December 2024, according to Charov's wife Inna, who administers his VKontakte page, eventually charging him "in a fabricated case for his anti-war position" on 24 December.

Prosecutors have submitted the case to court, an individual following Charov's case confirmed to Forum 18 on 29 January. Krasnoufimsk District Court has not yet listed any hearings on its website.

Charov's first "offence" of "discreditation" took place in 2022, when, according to court documents, he made multiple posts on VKontakte (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835) (since deleted) "attributing purposefully hostile, violent, discriminatory actions of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation against civilians or socially significant objects [and] attributing the commission of war crimes to Russian military personnel on the territory of Ukraine".

According to the Christians Against War Telegram channel, in one of these posts Charov said "You churchmen/church people! Come to your senses! Understand! Think about it, would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" [punctuation original]. In other posts, he apparently also called President Vladimir Putin the Antichrist, according to independent Russian media outlet Mediazona (<https://zona.media/news/2024/06/29/charov>). He also offered sanctuary at the shelter to any reservists fleeing call-up to the army in the "partial mobilisation", which began in September 2022.

On 18 April 2023, Krasnoufimsk District Court fined Charov (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835) 45,000 Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 and 20,000 Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.3.1 ("Incitement of hatred or enmity"). The fines added up to more than 4 weeks' average wages for Sverdlovsk Region. As Charov is a pensioner with a wife on a disability pension and residents to support in the shelter he runs, the fines were a large burden.

According to Investigative Committee documents seen by Forum 18, Charov committed the "offence" which led to his criminal prosecution on 3 September 2023, when he reposted an image from another user's VKontakte page (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2925), which contained the unattributed quotation: "A patriot is someone who wants to make their country better, the people richer, and the government more honest and fair. Not someone who justifies total destitution and corruption with imaginary greatness and spiritual bonds".

This was judged by unnamed linguistic experts to contain "linguistic and psychological signs of persuading [readers] of the negative nature of the goals of Russian state bodies' use of their powers, that is, their discreditation".

Forum 18 wrote to Sverdlovsk Region Prosecutor's Office on 31 January 2025, after it had issued its final indictment, asking why reposting a quotation is considered "discreditation" of the state bodies of the Russian Federation, when the quotation does not mention Russia or any specific state institution, and Charov did not add any comment. Forum 18 also asked what punishment prosecutors would be seeking. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Sverdlovsk Region of 10 February.

Forum 18 put the same questions to Krasnoufimsk Interdistrict Prosecutor's Office. Interdistrict Prosecutor Ilya Yefremov responded on 7 February, stating that prosecutors' offices "do not provide information on interpretation of a legal norm, [or] explanation of its application, development of a legal position upon request". He added: "In accordance with Article 49 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, everyone accused of committing a crime is presumed innocent until their guilt is proven in accordance with the procedure prescribed by federal law and established by a court verdict that has entered into legal force." He did not answer Forum 18's query.

In response to Forum 18's enquiries in July 2024, Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee's press service refused to answer questions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2925) about the case, saying that information about the investigation "is not subject to disclosure".

In early February 2024, investigators also opened a case against Charov under Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 ("Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism .. committed using mass media or electronic

or information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet"). According to his wife Inna, this was because of a "satirical comment" made in August 2023 on another user's VKontakte post about an act of arson at a military recruitment and enlistment office: "Award the Order of Courage posthumously with confiscation of property."

Russia's ever-increasing internet censorship (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2934) increasingly restricts the exercise of freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and other human rights.

The Investigative Committee has placed Charov under specific restrictions, including a ban on using the phone and internet and a ban on leaving his home district without permission.

Ilya Vasilyev: Zen Buddhist leader's trial underway

The trial of Zen Buddhist leader Ilya Vladimirovich Vasilyev (born 9 December 1973) on charges of spreading "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces is underway in Moscow. He remains in custody at Matrosskaya Tishina prison, a decision he says has "destructive religious consequences".

After being delayed three times because of "improper notification of the accused", according to Vasilyev's support group on Telegram (<https://t.me/dzenvnutrinas>), his first hearing took place at Moscow's Preobrazhensky District Court on 12 December 2024. Vasilyev has since made three further appearances before Judge Valentina Lebedeva. He is next due in court on 11 February 2025, according to the Moscow court system website.

Forum 18 asked Moscow City Prosecutor's Office on 3 February what punishment prosecutors would be seeking in the criminal case against Vasilyev. Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 10 February.

[UPDATE 14 February 2025: Ilya Apalshin, deputy head of the criminal justice department at Moscow City Prosecutor's Office, responded on 14 February, noting that Vasilyev is accused of a serious crime with a possible sentence of 5 to 10 years' imprisonment, and a court has upheld the decision to keep him in custody. "The judicial examination is currently underway, the evidence of the prosecution is being examined. The prosecutor's position on punishment will be set out during the parties' final presentation of arguments [preniya]," Apalshin added.]

No verdict is expected before the second half of March, Vasilyev's lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told Forum 18 on 28 January.

According to the Investigative Committee charging decision of 16 October 2024, seen by Forum 18, the case against Vasilyev is based on an English-language Facebook post (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943) 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."

Investigators opened the case against Vasilyev on 20 June 2024 under Criminal Code 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) ("Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Part 2, Paragraph e ("for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity against any social group").

Vasilyev made the Facebook post about attacks on Ukrainian cities, and others on VKontakte which led to an earlier administrative conviction, "solely out of religious conviction", he told Forum 18 through his lawyer Aleksanyan on 20 November 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943). He added that he is "not a politician and is engaged only in religion".

At the first full hearing in his trial on 12 December 2024, Vasilyev appeared in the defendant's glass box holding up a copy of the Russian Constitution and a piece of paper with the numbers 28 and 29, SOTAVision noted the same day (<https://t.me/sotavisionmedia/39625>). This was a reference to Articles 28 and 29 of the Constitution, which respectively guarantee freedom of conscience and religion and freedom of thought and speech.

"Today's trial is not just an examination of a specific charge against Ilya Vasilyev," lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told the court. "We have gathered to consider a case that concerns much deeper issues: freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and ultimately, the fundamental rights of every citizen of the Russian Federation." Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), he observed, is "actually aimed at people who peacefully express their beliefs against violence and war".

In his own statement in court, Vasilyev agreed that he had made the Facebook post but refused to admit guilt as he does not think that it broke the law. He went on to explain that, having taken the Bodhisattva vow, he was part of the Sangha, "a single worldwide and indivisible community of followers of the Buddha".

Vasilyev added: "Persecution of a Sangha member, even when he has broken the law, and in this case the accusation is far-fetched, has consequences for the entire country and state in which the disciple of Buddha is persecuted, and on the contrary, listening to the

words of monks and Bodhisattvas, protecting them from injustice and persecution, brings success and prosperity to all."

Vasilyev told the Judge: "This is an historic process, and more than the fate of this man is now in your hands. Your decision will have consequences that go far beyond the framework of national jurisprudence, including religious consequences."

Ilya Vasilyev: After more than 7 months' detention, judge rejects release

Ilya Vasilyev has been in detention since 22 June 2024, initially in Moscow's Kapotnya prison, then in Matrosskaya Tishina. On 19 November 2024, Judge Valentina Lebedeva of Moscow's Preobrazhensky District Court extended his period of detention by six months to 24 April 2025. He appealed unsuccessfully against this decision on 17 December 2024.

Forum 18 wrote to Preobrazhensky District Court and Moscow City Court on 31 January to ask why judges had decided that Vasilyev should continue to be kept in custody. Forum 18 put the same question to Moscow City Prosecutor's Office on 3 February. Forum 18 had received no responses by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 10 February.

While in detention, Vasilyev "meditates in his cell on Wednesdays, many Buddhists write him letters of support. He also reads religious literature whenever possible," his lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told Forum 18.

At his 17 December 2024 appeal against his detention, Vasilyev noted that he had been forced to celebrate a major Buddhist holiday (Bodhi Day, the day of the Buddha's enlightenment) on 8 December in the detention centre, rather than at home, where he has an altar.

"The [lower court] resolution says 'There are not enough guarantees of proper behaviour .. But what about the presumption of innocence?', the independent SOTAVision news outlet reported Vasilyev as saying (<https://t.me/sotavisionmedia/39835>). "Moscow pre-trial detention centres are overcrowded, people sleep here on folding beds, they sleep in turns. Why should I take up space here when there isn't enough?" His detention has "destructive religious consequences", Vasilyev added.

Vasilyev's address in pre-trial detention is:

107076 g. Moskva

ul. Matrosskaya Tishina 18

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

Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk: Detention extended

Pentecostal pastor Nikolay Nikolayevich Romanyuk (born 15 August 1962) is still under investigation under Criminal Code Article 280.4 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) ("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"), Part 2, Paragraph c "with the use of mass media, or electronic, or information and telecommunication networks, including the internet"). It is unknown whether he has been formally charged or when his case is likely to reach court, and he remains in detention despite ill health.

Pastor Romanyuk is facing prosecution because he gave a sermon at the Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church in Balashikha on 25 September 2022, the first Sunday after President Vladimir Putin announced the "partial mobilisation" of Russian army reservists. Romanyuk called on fellow Christians not to take part in the war against Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943). The service was livestreamed on the church's YouTube channel and the recording subsequently made available on YouTube and VKontakte.

Investigators carried out armed raids on several other church members' homes on the same day as Pastor Romanyuk's, as well as at the church itself and on church property in Volokolamsk.

Forum 18 has twice 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 Pastor 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 officials deemed it necessary to carry out armed raids on their homes. Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 10 February.

The Memorial Human Rights Centre named Pastor Romanyuk a political prisoner on 31 October 2024 (<https://memopzk.org/figurant/romanyuk-nikolaj-nikolaevich/>).

Investigators had Pastor Romanyuk placed in detention for an initial period of two months at a court hearing on 20 October 2024.

On 11 December 2024, Balashikha City Court extended this to 16 February 2025. Moscow Regional Court upheld the decision on 16 January 2025.

"Of course, we filed an appeal," Pastor Romanyuk's daughter Svetlana Zhukova, the church's choir director, wrote on her Telegram channel on 15 December 2024 (https://t.me/zhu4ka_sveta), referring to the initial detention order. "Because it is obvious (for us) that a pensioner, a father of many children, a pastor of a church, a person who does not have good health, and simply a citizen of the Russian Federation, who has never committed any offence in his entire life – could definitely be left under a written undertaking not to leave, or at least house arrest, since they give such an opportunity to people who commit real crimes."

Zhukova and her husband, Romanyuk's fellow pastor Roman Zhukov describe how Romanyuk became ill (https://t.me/zametki_o_zhizni_romana) in the detention centre and suffered difficulty lifting his left arm, nausea, and general weakness. They say the detention centre staff helped him and had him taken to hospital, where he spent a few days in intensive care, having had a mini-stroke. But investigators "still dragged him to court, because he is a terrible state criminal", Zhukov noted on 13 December 2024.

Pastor Romanyuk wrote to his family from the detention centre later in December 2024 saying that he was recovering. He is "physically weak (he has lost almost 30kg), but so resilient, with a very clear position, with a strong faith that even strengthens us", his daughter Svetlana Zhukova wrote on 16 January 2025.

Despite Pastor Romanyuk's health problems and his lawyer's insistence that he would not abscond, both the lower and regional courts ruled that he should remain in custody.

Forum 18 wrote to Balashikha City Court and Moscow Regional Court on 31 January 2025, asking why it was necessary to keep Pastor Romanyuk in detention and in what way he could be considered dangerous. Moscow Regional Court responded on 3 February, confirming only that it had upheld the lower court decision, and not answering Forum 18's questions.

[UPDATE 13 February 2025: On 13 February, the court extended Pastor Romanyuk's detention to 17 April.]

Pastor Romanyuk's address in pre-trial detention is:

142412, g. Noginsk

ul. 1-ya Revsobraniy 17

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Pastor Romanyuk tortured during armed raids

When investigators (it is unclear from which state agency) raided Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk's home and arrested him on 18 October 2024, armed officials struck him on the side of the head, causing fluid to leak from his ear, Romanyuk's family alleges.

Russia is a party to the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

(<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>). This defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

Under the Convention, Russia is obliged both to arrest any person suspected on good grounds of having committed, instigated or acquiesced to torture "or take other legal measures to ensure his [sic] presence", and also to try them under criminal law which makes "these offences punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account their grave nature".

An explanatory note added in July 2022 to Russian Criminal Code Article 286 ("Exceeding official authority") repeats the first part of this definition of torture almost verbatim. It does not include the section "when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity".

As the UN Committee against Torture (CAT) noted in its Concluding Observations on Russia in August 2018 (CAT/C/RUS/CO/6 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2FC%2FRUS%2FCO%2F6&Lang=en)), repeating its 2012 Concluding Observations recommendation: "The Committee once again urges the State party to criminalize torture as an independent crime."

The State party should also ensure that its definition of torture fully conforms to article 1 of the Convention, that the penalties for torture in its laws reflect the grave nature of the crime, as set out in the Committee's general comment No. 2 (<https://www.undocs.org/en/CAT/C/GC/2>) (2007) on the implementation of article 2, and that perpetrators are not charged solely with other crimes which carry lower maximum penalties and are subject to statutes of limitations."

Multiple torture cases, impunity for torturers

Torture by Russia's "security" apparatus is common, with a long standing pattern of impunity for torturers (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897). The UN Committee against Torture also noted in its 2018 Concluding Observations (CAT/C/RUS/CO/6 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CAT%2FC%2FRUS%2FCO%2F6&Lang=en)) that "it is concerned that police and prison doctors reportedly often failed or refused to conduct a proper and confidential examination of injuries sustained from torture or ill-treatment and that a prisoner's request to receive an independent medical examination was often rejected by the prison administration".

Torture cases with impunity of torturers include those responsible for torturing Jehovah's Witnesses in multiple cases, and those responsible for torturing a Muslim (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693) who met other Muslims to study the works of theologian Said Nursi. In one such case in Surgut the suspect torturers of Jehovah's Witnesses were given "best local department head" and "best investigator" awards (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693), ostensibly for their work before the torture took place.

In another case, in April 2024 prisoner of conscience Rinat Kiramov was tortured by fellow medical facility prisoners (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2916) over four days after he refused to give names of fellow Jehovah's Witnesses in his home town. They punched, kicked, waterboarded, threatened with rape, and shocked him with a stun gun. It is unclear how the prisoners had access to a stun gun.

Officials have repeatedly replied to Forum 18's questions about torture by either not answering, or asserting that no torture took place (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693), or that a case has not been opened against the suspect torturers.

Forum 18 sent enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee, the Moscow Region Investigative Committee, and the Moscow Region branch of the FSB security service, as well as to the Moscow Region branch of the National Guard (Rosgvardiya, which typically provides armed support to investigators in such situations), asking why officers had tortured Romanyuk and whether the personnel who had done so had been placed under investigation. Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 10 February.

Armed raids on Romanyuk's family and church members' homes

No one else yet appears to be facing criminal or administrative prosecution over Pastor Romanyuk's September 2022 sermon. Nevertheless, investigators carried out armed raids on the homes of several members of his family and church on the day of his arrest on 18 October 2024.

Romanyuk's daughter Svetlana Zhukova describes in detail on her Telegram channel (https://t.me/zhu4ka_sveta) how armed men arrived shortly after 6am, their knocks "shaking our entire wooden house". The armed men did not explain who they were or what they wanted, and searched the house, including the children's rooms.

"Going down the stairs in fear, I saw my husband [Roman Zhukov] in the hallway with horror. He was lying on his stomach, his legs in the house, his torso over the threshold – on the street. Around him was some kind of crowd of people in full military uniform, shields, helmets," Zhukova wrote on 13 December 2024. "Machine guns were aimed at my husband, I saw a laser sight on his back. He holds his hands behind his head, lying on the floor."

The armed men then demanded to see her 17-year-old son Kirill, whom they forced to stand barefoot on the veranda with his face to the wall. "Weapons were also aimed at him," Zhukova noted.

"I want to record the moment: we didn't know who these bandits were. Thieves? Terrorists? Murderers? Who has come? Armed men broke into our house, there were 10-12 of them. No one identified himself.

"I have told this story on many occasions during this time, but now, as I write all this, I am simply shaking. My stomach convulses and everything just freezes, shrinking inside into a huge lump that paralyses my body, involuntarily tensing all my muscles.."

The searchers confiscated documents, a laptop, and phones. "We immediately began to encounter huge inconveniences [because of this]," Zhukova wrote on 20 December 2025. She noted that they could no longer log into public services portals. "Our life – study, work – is simply impossible now without technology. In the end, one wonderful sister from the church offered me her old device, which really, really helped me out for some time.. And Kirill just bought himself a phone with the money he saved up.. In general,

we have begun to live in some slightly different reality."

Moscow: Record administrative fines

On 27 January 2025, a Moscow court handed Andrey Alekseyevich Buyanov (born 21 June 1980) what appears to be the largest total fine yet for criticising Russia's war against Ukraine from a religious perspective.

Moscow's Nagatino District Court issued 10 separate guilty verdicts under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897), Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for different posts Buyanov made on VKontakte between June 2023 and March 2024. The posts included anti-war songs and poems, reposts of other users' material, and observations on Aleksey Navalny's funeral.

In the written court decisions, seen by Forum 18, the amount of each fine is redacted. For this offence, possible fines range from 30,000 to 50,000 Roubles, meaning that Buyanov could have been fined anything from 300,000 to 500,000 Roubles overall. A fine of 300,000 Roubles would represent about 2 months' average wage in Moscow.

Buyanov, a Christian bard and songwriter, was present in court for all 10 consecutive five-minute hearings before Judge Gayane Akopyan, and "recognised his guilt", according to the verdicts.

The posts which led to Buyanov's multiple prosecutions were found during internet monitoring (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2934) in December 2024 by the Interior Ministry's Counter-Extremism Centre, which described them as "extremist materials". They include poems and songs, mostly of his own composition and all critical of Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as comments about Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians, the destruction of the Kakhovka dam, and the late opposition politician Aleksey Navalny (whose name is redacted in the written decisions).

On 1 March 2024, Buyanov made "a post supporting [Aleksey Navalny] with condemnation of the actions of the Russian Armed Forces during the Special Military Operation", one verdict stated, with two photos "showing a church near which people have gathered for the purpose of holding a mass protest against the activities of the Russian Federation".

Buyanov wrote: "I admire the People who were not afraid and came to the funeral service and burial of [Navalny]. It's a symbolic video – against the backdrop of a church, People chant what should have been heard in churches all these 2 years: 'No to war!' But it is not heard. The voice of God, banished from the churches.."

On 17 February 2024, the day after Navalny's death, Buyanov wrote "The Kingdom of Heaven to the murdered sufferer Aleksey.. This state has been killing people every day for two years now. Every day. And how much longer will this continue? The Church is not only silent, but also approves (not all, but the loud-mouthed elite)."

On 3 March 2024, Buyanov posted a photograph of the aftermath of a fatal Russian drone strike in Odesa: "This wonderful family of Evangelical Christians was destroyed along with the entrance of a residential building in Odessa [sic], which yesterday .. was hit by a Russian UAV-pilot-shahed. 32-year-old [redacted name] together with 4-month-old Timofey were found under the rubble - the young mother was pressing her son to her chest, so together they passed into Eternity. The service dog Tara, who found the bodies of the dead in the ruins, lay down and cried.. [Redacted name]'s husband and daughter Lizi were in another room during the attack and miraculously managed to survive."

On 19 August 2023, Buyanov quoted another VKontakte user's post about the Russian missile strike on the Ukrainian city of Chernihiv which had taken place that day, on which Orthodox Christians marked the festival of Transfiguration: "Transfiguration. People are returning from a festive service in churches - dressed up, with children, with baskets of blessed apples.. And – an explosion! This is how 'Orthodox' Russians 'congratulated' glorious Chernigov [sic] on the holiday. Are there still those who do not understand something?! Tell me about 'brothers', about 'one people', go ahead, try, damned Satanists.. As a result of this Russian missile strike on Chernigov, 7 people were killed and 129 people were injured, 15 of whom were children. Thirty minutes ago, a six-year-old boy died in hospital from his injuries'."

Forum 18 wrote to Moscow's Nagatino District Court on 6 February to ask why such posts were considered to "discredit" the Russian armed forces, and what fines Buyanov has received. Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 10 February.

[UPDATE 11 February 2025: Court press secretary Viktor Filinkov replied on 11 February that Buyanov had been fined 30,000 Roubles, but did not say if this was for each offence or the total fine. He added that the court "does not have the authority to provide citizens with advice and clarification on legal issues".] (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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