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RUSSIA: Criminal trial of anti-war believer begins, another continues, third awaited

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

On 14 April, a military court began the trial of Christian preacher Eduard Charov on criminal charges of repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces and "public justification of terrorism". He is accused over social media posts criticising Russia's war against Ukraine. The trial of Zen Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev – arrested in June 2024 - continues in Moscow over anti-war posts he made "solely out of religious conviction". Protestant pastor Nikolay Romanyuk is under investigation for an anti-war sermon. A court extended pre-trial detention until June, despite his poor health.

On 14 April, the criminal trial of 53-year-old independent Christian preacher Eduard Charov for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces began at the Central Region Military Court in Yekaterinburg. Charov also stands accused of "public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet" for what his wife Inna called a "sarcastic comment" on social media on another user's post. Charov's next hearing is due on 27 May.

In one of his social media posts, Charov wrote: "You church people! Come to your senses! Understand! Think about it, would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" (see below).

At present, Charov remains at home under specific restrictions, including a ban on using the phone and internet and on leaving his home district without permission (see below).

Forum 18 has repeatedly asked Sverdlovsk Region Prosecutor's Office and Krasnoufimsk District Prosecutor's Office how any of his social media comments could be considered "discreditation" of the Armed Forces or Russian state bodies. Forum 18 also asked what punishment prosecutors would be seeking in the criminal case. Forum 18 has received no response (see below).

Charov is among three religious leaders facing criminal cases for condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds and criticising Russia's conduct of its war.

The trial of 51-year-old Zen Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev continues in Moscow on charges of disseminating "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces "for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity against any social group". Vasilyev is being prosecuted for an English-language Facebook post about Russian rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities, which he made "solely out of religious conviction", his lawyer told Forum 18 (see below).

Vasilyev – arrested in June 2024 - spent 15 days in solitary confinement from mid-February 2025 for allegedly not walking with his hands behind his back in his detention centre in Moscow (see below).

Forum 18 wrote to the head of Matrosskaya Tishina prison, Andrey Selyunin, asking why Vasilyev had been put in solitary confinement for such a long time for a minor infringement of the rules and why his letters had been delayed or not delivered because he used the expression "political prisoners". Forum 18 has received no response (see below).

Protestant pastor Nikolay Romanyuk is under criminal investigation for preaching a sermon in which he explicitly stated that, "on the basis of Holy Scripture", Christians should not go to fight in Ukraine. The 62-year-old has been in detention since October 2024 despite his poor health (he suffered a mini-stroke while behind bars). A court extended his pre-trial detention period for a third time on 15 April until 17 June (see below).

"Time after time, with horror in their eyes, [investigators tell the court] what a dangerous criminal Romanyuk is, and why he should remain under the watchful eye of [prison service] representatives, locked in a [detention centre] cell," Pastor Romanyuk's son-in-law noted after the latest hearing. "Time after time, independent judges do not see an objective reason to transfer an elderly man to house arrest" (see below).

Pastor Romanyuk faces possible charges of "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 the media or the internet (see below).

Forum 18 has repeatedly 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 is being kept in detention, whether any criminal or administrative cases have been opened against any other church members, and why officials deemed it necessary to carry out armed raids on their homes. Forum 18 has received no response (see below).

On 1 April, a St Petersburg court fined Grigory Mikhnov-Vaytenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2972), Archbishop of the Apostolic Orthodox Church (which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate), who has consistently opposed Russia's war against Ukraine. He was punished for allegedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces in a video on his Telegram channel more than three years earlier. Mikhnov-Vaytenko now expects a second accusation of "discreditation" and criminal prosecution.

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897) to pressure religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion of Ukraine. 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).

One of those sentenced to imprisonment, Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov, who was released in August 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2925), has now left Russia. He says he pleaded guilty only under pressure, and is now preparing a cassational appeal against his conviction.

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.

Sverdlovsk Region: Criminal "discreditation" trial begins

On 14 April, the trial of independent Christian preacher Eduard Aleksandrovich Charov (born 18 July 1971) began at the Central Region (Okrug) Military Court in Yekaterinburg. His next hearing is due on 27 May, according to the court website. At present, he remains at home under specific restrictions, including a ban on using the phone and internet and on leaving his home district without permission.

Prosecutors charged him on 24 December 2024 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2957) under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" more than once in a year) and Article 205.2, Part 2 ("Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet"). Both accusations are based on comments he made on the VKontakte social network, none of which called for any violent action.

Terrorism-related cases fall under the jurisdiction of regional (okruzhny) military courts, regardless of the status of the defendant. The case against Charov, who is a civilian, nevertheless remains the responsibility of civilian prosecutors.

The charges against Charov carry the following possible punishments:

- Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 – a fine of 100,000 to 300,000 Roubles; or up to 3 years' assigned labour; or 4 to 6 months' detention in an "arrest house" (arestny dom); or up to 5 years' imprisonment.

- Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 – a fine of 300,000 to 1 million Roubles; or 5 to 7 years' imprisonment.

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 penalties for each, then add them together partially or in their entirety to form an aggregate sentence.

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 (<https://t.me/shaltnotkill>) Telegram channel, in one of these posts Charov said "You 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>).

On 18 April 2023, Krasnoufimsk District Court fined Charov 45,000 Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835) 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. Charov is a pensioner and his wife Inna receives disability benefits – they run a shelter for homeless elderly people in the Sverdlovsk Region village of Savinovo. The fines therefore presented a serious burden.

(After the announcement of "partial mobilisation in September 2022, Charov also publicly offered sanctuary at the shelter to any reservists fleeing call-up to the army.)

According to Investigative Committee documents seen by Forum 18, Charov committed the offence which led to his prosecution under Criminal Code Article 280.3 on 3 September 2023, when he reposted an image from another user's VKontakte page. This contained the unattributed quotation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2925): "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."

Unnamed linguistic experts judged this 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 has repeatedly asked Sverdlovsk Region Prosecutor's Office and Krasnoufimsk District Prosecutor's Office how any of these comments could be considered "discreditation" of the Armed Forces or Russian state bodies, but has received no explanation.

Forum 18 also asked on 10 April what punishment prosecutors would be seeking in the criminal case. Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Sverdlovsk Region of 16 April.

In early February 2024, investigators also opened a case against Charov under Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 for what his wife Inna called a "sarcastic comment" he made in August 2023 on another user's VKontakte post about an act of arson at a military recruitment and enlistment office in the Sverdlovsk Region town of Polevskoy: "Award the Order of Courage posthumously with confiscation of property."

"This is all slander against me", Charov commented to local news website It's My City (<https://itsmycity.ru/2025-04-14/vekaterinburge-nachali-sudit-sverdlovskogo-propovednika-obvinyaemogo-vopravdanii-terrorizma>) after his first full hearing before Judge Sergey Rassokha on 14 April. "They simply designated a terrorist from a remote village to fulfil the plan for terrorists and that's it. And so there is not even any evidence of a crime."

Moscow: Buddhist leader's trial continues

The trial of Zen Buddhist leader Ilya Vladimirovich Vasilyev (born 9 December 1973) is continuing in Moscow (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2957). He remains in custody at Matrosskaya Tishina prison, more than nine months after his June 2024 arrest.

Vasilyev stands accused of "Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation 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 Paragraph 'e'). This can incur a fine of up to 5 million Roubles, up to 5 years' assigned labour, or up to 10 years' imprisonment.

Vasilyev has made six appearances so far at the capital's Preobrazhensky District Court. The court postponed his latest scheduled hearing, on 19 March, as Judge Valentina Lebedeva was involved in the sentencing of another case. It is now due to take place on 18 April to give the defence time to present evidence, Vasilyev's lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told Forum 18 on 14 April.

At this hearing, Judge Lebedeva will also rule on whether to extend Vasilyev's term of detention. This is currently due to expire on 24 April. There will likely be three or four more hearings before a verdict is expected, Aleksanyan believes.

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.

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."

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

Vasilyev has been in detention since 22 June 2024, initially in Moscow's Kapotnya prison, then in Matrosskaya Tishina. On 15 February 2025, he was placed in solitary confinement (kartser) for 15 days as punishment for failing to walk with his hands behind his back as he and his cellmates returned from the bathhouse. His cellmates also received terms of solitary confinement, but Vasilyev's was the longest, "despite the fact that this was his first violation", human rights monitoring group OVD-Info noted on 17 February (<https://ovd.info/express-news/2025/02/17/v-karcer-iz-za-neubrannykh-za-spinu-ruk-otpravili-nastoyatelya-moskovskogo>).

In November 2024, Vasilyev also reported problems with sending and receiving letters – a member of detention centre staff eventually told him that using the expression "political prisoners" in correspondence was "not allowed, because we do not have political prisoners in Russia. We just have prisoners."

Forum 18 wrote to the head of Matrosskaya Tishina prison, Andrey Selyunin, on 11 April to ask:

- why Vasilyev had been put in solitary confinement for such a long time for a minor infringement of the rules;
- and why his letters had been delayed or not delivered because of the expression "political prisoners".

Forum 18 had received no response by the end of the working day in Moscow of 16 April.

Vasilyev's address in detention:

107076 g. Moskva

ul. Matrosskaya Tishina 18

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

Moscow Region: Pentecostal pastor still in detention, investigation ongoing

On 15 April, Balashikha City Court in Moscow Region extended Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk's pre-trial detention for a third time, on this occasion until 17 June. Despite his poor health (he has suffered a mini-stroke while behind bars) and his age (62), three different judges have so far refused to release him under house arrest to await trial. It remains unknown when his case will reach court.

Nikolay Nikolayevich Romanyuk (born 15 August 1962) is facing prosecution for a sermon (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943) he gave at 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). In the sermon he called on fellow Christians not to take part in the war against Ukraine.

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 Romanyuk's and several other church members' homes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943) on 18 October 2024, as well as at the church itself and on church property in Volokolamsk.

During the raid on Romanyuk's home, armed officials struck him on the side of the head (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2957), causing fluid to leak from his ear, his family alleges. No official is known to have been punished for this torture.

Under 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>), 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".

At other addresses, armed officers forced people to lie on the floor for hours, held them at gunpoint, and confiscated digital devices and bank cards.

Romanyuk subsequently became the first person to be charged under Criminal Code Article 280.4 for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective. This 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" – in Pastor Romanyuk's case "with the use of mass media, or electronic, or information and telecommunication networks, including the internet" (Part 2, Paragraph 'c').

Forum 18 has repeatedly 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 is being kept in detention;
- whether any criminal or administrative cases have 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 end of the working day in Moscow Region of 16 April.

Investigators had Pastor Romanyuk placed in detention for an initial period of two months at a court hearing on 20 October 2024. Judges have extended his detention every two months since. Romanyuk has appealed unsuccessfully against every extension at Moscow City Court.

Investigators have not questioned Romanyuk since January, lawyer Anatoly Pchelintsev of the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice, who has been following the case, wrote on his Telegram channel (<https://t.me/advocatavp>) on 16 April, so "I want to understand why he, a far from young man, is being kept in custody, where he is losing his last health". Pchelintsev noted that defendants should be kept in detention only in exceptional circumstances, and that, from the point of view of evidence, the case is relatively straightforward, so should not be lasting this long.

The detention hearings "have similar features", Romanyuk's son-in-law and fellow pastor Roman Zhukov noted on his Telegram channel (https://t.me/zametki_o_zhizni_romana) on 15 April. "At each one, fairly monotonously and without a drop of creativity, the investigators say the same thing about the work they've done .. Time after time, with horror in their eyes, they tell [the court] what a dangerous criminal Romanyuk is, and why he should remain under the watchful eye of [prison service] representatives, locked in a [detention centre] cell. Time after time, independent judges do not see an objective reason to transfer an elderly man to house arrest. All this looks like a poorly staged performance, in which each of the participants knows their role."

"Dad is not guilty of anything! At the moment, he is not a convict, he is simply locked up, tormented and exhausted of spiritual and physical strength," his daughter Svetlana Zhukova wrote on her Telegram channel (https://t.me/s/zhu4ka_sveta) on 16 April.

"If you only knew what periods of languor he sometimes goes through – his health worsens, he can hardly eat anything, sleeps poorly. Just a couple of weeks ago, he lost another 7-8 kilograms in a week and a half. He wrote us little letters then, in which he said how he dreams of going to heaven. Literally saying goodbye to us. It is very hard! .. Then – a period of inspiration, joy, cheerfulness. For how long? I don't know. These 'swings' are just terribly exhausting."

At the detention hearing on 13 February, the judge permitted Romanyuk to speak. He said that "war is always bad, and God's word does not allow us to kill people! It does not matter on whose side, in which country! For this reason, our country has alternative [civilian] service, a legal one!", Zhukova reported on her Telegram channel. "Dad loves his country, loves the Russian people with all his heart, and has served people all his life. And he remains true to his convictions and the evangelical position."

Pastor Romanyuk's address in pre-trial detention:

142412, g. Noginsk

ul. 1-ya Revsobraniy 17

FKU Sledstvenniy izolyator No. 11 UFSIN Rossii po Moskovskoy oblasti

(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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