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RUSSIA: Buddhist leader given longest known anti-war jail term

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

A Moscow court jailed Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev on 25 June for eight years for allegedly disseminating "knowingly false information" about Russia's Armed Forces, the longest known prison term for opposing Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds. "We called for the voice of reason, but it seems the judge heard only the voice of the prosecutor's office," his lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan said. A court spokesperson refused comment on the verdict or why the Judge refuses a prison visit from a Buddhist priest. Protestant pastor Nikolay Romanyuk's criminal trial may begin in mid-July.

On 25 June, a year after his arrest, a Moscow court sentenced Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev to eight years' imprisonment for allegedly disseminating "knowingly false information" about the Russian Armed Forces. This is the longest known prison term yet handed to an individual who opposes Russia's war against Ukraine on religious grounds. Vasilyev, who refused to admit guilt, intends to challenge his conviction, and his lawyer has already lodged an initial appeal on his behalf.

"We called for the voice of reason, but it seems the judge heard only the voice of the prosecutor's office," his lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan said outside the court after the sentencing hearing (see below).

Forum 18 asked Moscow's Preobrazhensky District Court why Judge Valentina Lebedeva decided that such a long jail term was necessary, and in what way Vasilyev could be considered dangerous. Court press secretary Mariya Martynenko responded that she did not "have the right to comment on the legality and validity of court decisions (orders) or the individual actions of a judge" (see below).

Prosecutors had charged Vasilyev under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("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") for a single Facebook post in English about a Russian missile attack on the Ukrainian city of Kherson in 2022 (see below).

Vasilyev made this post, as well as others on VKontakte which led to an earlier administrative prosecution, "solely out of religious conviction", he told Forum 18 through his lawyer Aleksanyan in November 2024. He added that he is "not a politician and is engaged only in religion" (see below).

Vasilyev has spent the year since his arrest in June 2024 in detention in two Moscow prisons. Currently, he remains in custody in Matrosskaya Tishina prison awaiting appeal (see below).

"The judge has denied applications for access to a priest three times. She is currently on the fourth application," Vasilyev's lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told Forum 18. Court press secretary Mariya Martynenko refused to explain why the Judge had repeatedly denied Vasilyev's requests for a prison visit from a Buddhist priest. The head of Matrosskaya Tishina prison, Sergey Bobryshev, did not respond to Forum 18's questions (see below).

Two other religious leaders are currently undergoing criminal prosecution for condemning on religious grounds Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its conduct of the war.

Protestant pastor Nikolay Romanyuk has been charged with "Public calls to implement activities directed against the security of the Russian Federation" (Criminal Code Article 280.4) for preaching a sermon in which he explicitly stated that, "on the basis of Holy Scripture", Christians should not go to fight in Ukraine. Balashikha City Court registered Pastor Romanyuk's criminal case on 26 June and has scheduled an initial hearing for 7 July (see below).

The 62-year-old Pastor Romanyuk has been in detention since October 2024 despite his poor health (he suffered a mini-stroke while behind bars). He is held in a windowless cell in which the lights are never turned off. A Moscow Region court extended his pre-trial detention period for a fourth time on 6 June. The Investigator has refused to allow him a visit from a pastor and to receive communion, Pastor Romanyuk's daughter complains. Officials have not responded to Forum 18's questions on his case (see below).

An independent Christian preacher who runs a homeless shelter in Sverdlovsk Region, 53-year-old Eduard Charov, is on trial at a military court in Yekaterinburg for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces (Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1). He is not currently in detention. His next hearing is due to take place on 25 July (see below).

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 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. 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.

Three jail terms, three fines on criminal charges, plus administrative punishments

Since February 2022, courts have sentenced three people to imprisonment (most recently, Buddhist Ilya Vasilyev – see below) and fined three on criminal charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904) 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=2897) against people who have left Russia, and have placed them on the Federal Wanted List.

Individuals also continue to face prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for opposing the war in Ukraine from a religious perspective.

St Petersburg's Nevsky District Court fined Archbishop Grigory Mikhnov-Vaytenko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2972) of the Apostolic Orthodox Church (not part of the Moscow Patriarchate) 30,000 Roubles on 1 April 2025 for comparing Russia's invasion of Ukraine with the biblical parable of the Gadarene swine. He is still trying to challenge his conviction after his initial appeal was rejected for not having a document properly attached, he told Forum 18 on 25 June.

Police in St Petersburg also appear to have opened a case under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 against Aleksandr Khmelyov, a priest of the Association of Christian Eucharistic Communities (Old Catholic). Dzerzhinsky District Court registered the case on 9 June 2025, according to its website, but transferred it to a different jurisdiction. Forum 18 has as yet found no record of the case at another district court in St Petersburg. It is unclear what the basis for the prosecution may be.

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.

Vasilyev: Buddhist receives longest known anti-war jail term

On 25 June, a year after his arrest, Preobrazhensky District Court in Moscow found Buddhist and computer programmer Ilya Vladimirovich Vasilyev (born 9 December 1973) guilty of spreading "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces. Judge Valentina Lebedeva sentenced him to 8 years' imprisonment. She also handed him a 4-year ban on administering websites after his release.

This is the longest jail term yet to have been imposed on an individual known to oppose Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective.

Vasilyev and his lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan intend to challenge his conviction, and lodged an initial appeal on the day of sentencing, Aleksanyan told Forum 18. Currently, Vasilyev remains in custody at Moscow's Matrosskaya Tishina prison, where he has been held for most of the year since his arrest in June 2024.

Vasilyev stood 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).

Before his prosecution, he 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 was 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. The picture is called 'Christmas 2022'."

Included in the post was a painting by Ukrainian-born artist Iriney Yurchuk (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2701372876663386>), depicting a nativity scene in the ruins of a bombed-out block of flats.

According to the prosecution, with this post (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>) Vasilyev deliberately "misled an unlimited number of people" and "created the appearance of illegal activity that violated international law" by the Russian armed forces and government, acting out of "political hatred, expressed in a 'disdainful, unfriendly, hostile, aggressive' attitude towards the authorities".

"We called for the voice of reason, but the judge heard only the voice of the prosecutor's office," lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan commented outside the court after sentencing, human rights group OVD-Info noted (<https://t.me/ovdinfo/38261>).

Forum 18 wrote to Preobrazhensky District Court on 1 July, asking why Judge Lebedeva had decided that such a long jail term was necessary, and in what way Vasilyev could be considered dangerous.

Court press secretary Mariya Martynenko responded on 3 July, saying that she did not "have the right to comment on the legality and validity of court decisions (orders) or the individual actions of a judge".

Vasilyev: "Purely religious" aim

In court, Vasilyev stated that he had seen Iriney Yurchuk's painting of a nativity scene on Facebook and reposted it with a comment "about what Catholic Christmas 2022 was like for Ukrainians", Mediazona reported in its account of the trial (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>) on 25 June.

Vasilyev feared for his father and other relatives in Kherson, and was upset by seeing images of corpses after Russian missile strikes: "From the standpoint of Buddhism, it is bad when people die, especially a violent death, and it is good when people are helped to survive, when a truce is declared."

His post had a "purely religious" aim and was "a call for peace", Vasilyev said. "The ancient holy images in the painting call for reconciliation and instil hope that hostilities between Russia and Ukraine will one day cease .. I was deeply struck by the light, kindness and hope depicted. It is blasphemous to me that the prosecution is imposing something of its own, something illegal, on a bright, festive Christmas publication, even in defiance of the author's clearly stated position."

Commenting on his alleged motive of "hatred or enmity", Vasilyev noted that "after 26 years of meditation, negative emotions in the form of hatred or envy, even if they arise, no longer serve as motivation". In his final speech to the court on 23 June, he reiterated that to impute "a motive of hatred or hostility to a practising Buddhist is like claiming that a newspaper got wet in a fire", since Buddhism requires its adherents "cope with such emotions and not be guided by them in one's actions".

Two slightly different Russian translations of the English-language post were used in the case, lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan explained to Forum 18 on 3 July. One was a machine translation which investigators sent for expert analysis, the other a professional translation submitted to the court.

"In our view, the translation basically incorrectly conveys the meaning of the text in English," Aleksanyan told Forum 18. "There was just such a terrible expert analysis [of the post] that the task was simply to obtain an adequate re-examination. We conducted our own and brought our specialist to court, who did not find any 'fakes' in the text. And an expert from the FSB with 1 year of experience conducted a linguistic examination that was far from adequate."

Vasilyev stated in court (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>) that he wrote in English on Facebook to communicate with the many Buddhists from different countries he had added as friends.

The court heard positive character references from Vasilyev's mother, family friends, and former students from his "Civil School of Hackers". It also heard from American Zen Buddhist priest Ingen Breen, who prepared Vasilyev for ordination as a monk and described him as "a person who values truth, peace, and the well-being of all people".

Also attached to the case file was a petition for Vasilyev's release from 66 Buddhist supporters and a statement by the Memorial Human Rights Centre from 17 July 2024, recognising Vasilyev as a political prisoner, the Slovo Zashchite Telegram channel noted on 23 June (<https://t.me/endoflaw/828>).

On 23 June, after the final exchange of arguments, the prosecutor noted no aggravating circumstances in the case, and asked Judge Lebedeva to take into account the "numerous letters of gratitude" sent in support of Vasilyev, as well as his elderly mother's state of health. Despite this, the prosecutor requested a sentence of 8 years and 6 months' imprisonment, plus a 4-year ban on administering websites.

Vasilyev: Searches, administrative prosecution, arrest

Ilya Vasilyev appears to have first come to investigative agencies' attention in early 2023, though it remains unclear how. Federal Security Service (FSB) investigator Nikolay Bakashin stated in court during the criminal trial that he could not disclose such details (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>). Investigators examined Vasilyev's profile on the VKontakte social network on 4 February 2023, finding a number of anti-war comments.

In court, FSB Investigator Bakashin stated that he had only learned of Vasilyev's religious activities when speaking to him in May 2023 and held no prejudice against him: "We are a multi-confessional, multi-religious country, and there is no bad attitude towards any religion."

Police and FSB security service officers conducted a search of Vasilyev's flat on 11 May 2023. During the search he voluntarily unlocked and handed over his phone, tablet computer, and laptop, the Slovo Zashchite Telegram channel noted in its account of the trial (<https://t.me/endoflaw/843>) on 25 June.

The officers told Vasilyev (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>) that "nobody is imprisoned for their words in Russia" and that the FSB only needed to "ascertain the absence" of links to Ukrainian security services.

They then took Vasilyev to a police station and charged him under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). Moscow's Preobrazhensky District Court fined him 40,000 Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943) the same day.

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

After the administrative hearing, an investigator tried to question Vasilyev there and then in the court corridor about his activities on Facebook and Twitter, according to OVD-Info's <https://ovd.info/2024/10/01/russkaya-inkviziciya1> October 2024 account of his prosecution. In response, Vasilyev cited Article 51 of the Russian Constitution (according to which nobody is obliged to testify against themselves), then went home and deleted his social media accounts.

"My plans are to continue practicing Zen in Moscow, preferably avoiding the adventures behind bars that are fashionable in Russia," Vasilyev wrote on one of the now-deleted accounts after his administrative case. "I expressed my views on what is happening a year ago, and quite harshly, and they have now been assessed as a fine for discreditation [of the Armed Forces]. If I continue to develop this topic, I'll receive a prison term and the only way to come and practice Zen with me will be on a [prison] visit."

The FSB security service had already found, however, two Facebook posts which formed the basis of the criminal case they eventually opened on 20 June 2024 (only one of which they later cited in the indictment). They searched Vasilyev's home again and arrested him the same day (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943).

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

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

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

Mikheyev's report on Vasilyev's posts did not appear in the final indictment, Mediazona noted in its report of the trial (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>). Investigators instead turned to the FSB's own Institute of Forensic Science. Out

of six English-language posts submitted for examination, only one allegedly contained "an assertion about the commission of destructive actions by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation against civilian objects on the territory of another state".

Vasilyev believes that security services were trying to "squeeze him out of the country" by means of the search of his home and the initial administrative case against him, he told Mediazona (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>). He added that he would have left "if personal safety, and not religion" had been his first priority.

Vasilyev: Clergy prison visits denied

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 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2971).

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."

The court has also refused Vasilyev access to a Buddhist priest, despite his attempts since December to arrange a visit. "The judge has denied applications for access to a priest three times. She is currently on the fourth application," Vasilyev's lawyer Gevorg Aleksanyan told Forum 18 on 3 July. "The reasons are different each time. First, [it was that] Ilya himself must file the application, not a lawyer. Then, that there must be a Buddhist organisation which has an agreement with the Federal Penitentiary Service. We presented one, but the judge wrote that she has no information about the agreement."

"The administration of the pre-trial detention centre will let the priest in if the court gives permission," Aleksanyan added.

Vasilyev has been able to meditate in his cell, correspond with fellow Buddhists, and read religious literature (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2957). His cellmates treat his meditation practices "normally", he told Mediazona (<https://zona.media/article/2025/06/25/arvi-hacker>).

His cellmates sometimes "ask questions, talk about their attitude to Buddhism and Japanese culture": "I had a good relationship with a Muslim in my first cell. He would get up early in the morning to read namaz, then wake me up for morning meditation," Vasilyev commented. "We managed to find common ground in philosophy, although Islam and Buddhism are quite distant religions."

Forum 18 wrote to the head of Matrosskaya Tishina prison, Sergey Bobryshev, on 11 April and 1 July to ask:

- why Vasilyev was put in solitary confinement for such a long time for a minor infringement of the rules;
- why his letters had been delayed or not delivered because of the expression "political prisoners";
- and latterly, why he had been denied access to a Buddhist priest.

Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow of 4 July.

Forum 18 also asked Preobrazhensky District Court on 1 July to explain why it had refused Vasilyev's requests for visits from a Buddhist priest. Press secretary Mariya Martynenko responded on 3 July, saying that she did not "have the right to comment on the legality and validity of court decisions (orders) or the individual actions of a judge".

Romanyuk: Moscow Region pastor's trial to begin soon?

The criminal trial of Protestant pastor Nikolay Nikolayevich Romanyuk (born 15 August 1962) - who told fellow believers not to go and fight in Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2971) - is likely to begin this month, according to his daughter Svetlana Zhukova. In the meantime, Balashikha City Court extended his pre-trial detention for a fourth time on 6 June.

After Pastor Romanyuk's 6 June detention hearing, Zhukova noted (https://t.me/zhu4ka_sveta/501) that investigators had already sent his case to the Prosecutor's Office, and that his trial could begin in mid-July. Balashikha City Court registered Pastor Romanyuk's criminal case on 26 June and has scheduled an initial hearing for 7 July under Judge Yevgeny Parshin.

By the time the trial begins, Pastor Romanyuk will have spent at least nine months in detention. If convicted of calling for actions against state security, he could be sentenced to 3 to 6 years' imprisonment or a fine of 300,000 to 1 million Roubles.

Pastor Romanyuk gave a sermon (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2943) 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 which he said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was "not our war".

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

The service was livestreamed on the church's YouTube channel and the recording subsequently made available on YouTube and VKontakte.

Pastor 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.

Article 280.4 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 v).

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

While arresting Pastor Romanyuk, armed officers struck him on the side of the head, causing fluid to leak from his ear, his family alleges. No official is known to have been punished for this torture.

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 (nobody else is known to have been subsequently charged in connection with Romanyuk's case).

Romanyuk: Investigator refuses pastoral visits

Investigators have had Pastor Nikolay Romanyuk kept in detention in Noginsk Investigation Prison ever since his October 2024 arrest, despite repeated attempts by his lawyers to have him placed under house arrest instead. Balashikha City Court extended his pre-trial detention for a fourth time on 6 June.

"On average, once a month he has either an extension of his detention (they can extend it every 2 months for up to a year or longer, pending a conviction while the investigation is ongoing) or an appeal (an appeal for [transfer to] house arrest), his daughter Svetlana Zhukova wrote on her Telegram channel (https://t.me/zhu4ka_sveta/498) on 4 June, shortly before a judge again ordered that Pastor Romanyuk should remain in custody.

"When there is an extension, he is brought to court in Balashikha, and if they let us in, we can see him. When there is an appeal, then only on [a TV screen]," Zhukova complained.

She commented that her father has not been allowed to see a pastor or take communion, despite regular visits to the detention centre by Russian Orthodox clergy: "Dad has the right to do this, but the investigator also has the right not to allow him a visit with communion, since Dad is 'very dangerous and can influence or (God forbid) affect someone with his criminal intentions'."

Pastor Romanyuk remains behind bars – in a windowless cell in which the lights are never turned off, his daughter noted – despite his age and poor health. He has suffered a suspected mini-stroke (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2957) while in detention, as well as other medical problems. According to Zhukova, her father's vision has worsened and his psoriasis, "which had not bothered him for a long time", has returned. He has also rapidly lost "about 40kg" (90 pounds) in weight.

"As a person, he is terribly broken, and of course, he is not made of iron. And it can be very hard. But his trust in God is simply incredible, boundless!"

Forum 18 has repeatedly sent enquiries to the Federal Investigative Committee, the Moscow Region Investigative Committee, and the Moscow Region branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB), 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 also sent enquiries to the same state agencies, 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 Pastor Romanyuk during his arrest and whether the personnel who had done so had been placed under investigation.

Forum 18 had received no responses by the afternoon of the working day in Moscow Region of 4 July.

Charov: Sverdlovsk Region preacher's trial continues

On 27 June, independent Christian preacher Eduard Aleksandrovch Charov (born 18 July 1971), made his third appearance at the Central District Military Court in Yekaterinburg on charges (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2971) of "Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" more than once in a year (Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1) and "Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet" (Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2).

Charov's next hearing is due to take place on 25 July. 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.

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") for several posts he made on VKontakte (since deleted). One of the posts said (<https://ovd.info/en/blessed-are-peacemakers-what-christian-religious-leaders-face-when>) "You church people! Come to your senses! Understand! Think about it, would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" [punctuation original].

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. On this date, he apparently reposted a video on his VKontakte profile.

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."

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. (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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