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RUSSIA: Government pressure on religious leaders to support Ukraine war

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

The government has pressured religious leaders to support Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, and prosecuted and fined religious believers and leaders who publicly oppose the war. Lutheran Bishop Dietrich Brauer and Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt left Russia in March after resisting state pressure to support the war. The FSB security service warned local religious leaders, including at least three Protestant pastors individually in one region. "Such warnings don't take place now," a pastor told Forum 18 in July. "Those [March warnings] were enough for everyone."

Russia's government has used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting Vladimir Putin's renewed invasion of Ukraine from 24 February. These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who have publicly opposed the war. It is unclear what effect this has had on religious believers who may have considered making a public protest against the war. Similar warnings and prosecutions have been used against many Russians who express opposition to the war for any reason.

Two senior religious leaders – both of whom felt they had to leave Russia - have stated that they and other religious leaders came under pressure not to discuss or condemn Russia's renewed war against Ukraine. Lutheran Bishop Dietrich Brauer, who left Russia for Germany in March, said that, at the start of the war, President Putin's administration made "a clear demand" of religious leaders to speak out in favour of the invasion (see below).

The Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt, who is now in Israel, also left Russia under pressure in March because of his opposition to the war. "As the terrible war against Ukraine unfolded over the last few months, I could not remain silent, viewing so much human suffering," he said on Twitter on 7 July. "As time progressed, it became clear that the Jewish community of Moscow would be endangered by me remaining in my position" (see below).

In March, as Russia's war against Ukraine was intensifying, the FSB security service warned local religious leaders not to publicly oppose the war. In one region, a Protestant pastor noted, at least three fellow pastors received such individual warnings. "Such warnings don't take place now," the pastor told Forum 18 on 15 July. "Those [March warnings] were enough for everyone" (see below).

Other religious figures - including Patriarch Kirill of the Moscow Patriarchate, Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia, Old Believer Metropolitan Kornily, and Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky of the Pentecostal Union - have supported Russia's war against Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738).

While many religious organisations in Russia still support the invasion of Ukraine, small numbers of laypeople and clergy continue to protest from an explicitly religious perspective. Like thousands of other Russians who every day voice their opposition to the war in public spaces and online, they are soon detained by police and frequently prosecuted and fined (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/24/crackdown-russia-requires-dedicated-un-monitoring>).

Many of the religious believers who have opposed the war have been Russian Orthodox, both of the Moscow Patriarchate and other branches. Like Lutheran Bishop Brauer and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Goldschmidt, some have had to leave Russia because they oppose the war (see below).

One priest, Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov of St Petersburg, posted videos criticising Russia's invasion of Ukraine from a Christian perspective. He was arrested on 7 June, and is being held in St Petersburg's Kresty prison awaiting trial for the new criminal offence of disseminating "knowingly false information" about the military. On 28 July, the city's Kalinin District Court ordered that Fr Ioann should be kept in custody for another month (see below).

Darya Lebedeva, head of the joint court system press service for St Petersburg, insisted to Forum 18 that Fr Ioann had to be held in detention because, "if at liberty and not isolated from society, Kurmoyarov may continue his criminal activity, conceal himself from

investigators and the court, destroy evidence and otherwise interfere with the criminal proceedings" (see below).

On 3 July, Galina Borisova, an actor and a parishioner of the Catholic Church of St Louis, Moscow, pinned a piece of paper to the church's Russian flag. The paper read "No bellum" and "There is no place for the flag of an aggressor state beside the flag of the Holy See". A nun removed the paper after a few minutes, by which time about 50 people had already seen it. On 1 August police registered a case against her at Moscow's Meshchansky District Court under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") (see below).

The Russian authorities also continue to block online access to information about the war in Ukraine, and have also banned many foreign citizens from entering the country. Some of the blocked websites and banned foreign citizens are explicitly religious (see below).

Senior religious leaders pressured to support war

Bishop Dietrich Brauer, who left Russia in March and moved to Germany, resigned as head of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Russia on 1 June. The Church Synod replaced him as Archbishop by his former deputy, Vladimir Provorov, and appointed Brauer Archbishop-Emeritus. He continues to hold the position of Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of European Russia, to which he was elected in 2011.

"The Presidential Administration made a clear demand of all religious leaders to speak out and support the war," Bishop Brauer stated in a March interview for Württemberg Diocese (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741). "We were not allowed to talk about the war, pray for peace, or contact our Ukrainian brothers and sisters." Brauer gave a sermon in Moscow's Cathedral of St Peter and St Paul on 27 February, which consisted of thinly veiled criticism of the war (https://vk.com/dietrichbrauer?w=wall4574078_2279). He left Russia for Germany shortly afterwards and sees no possibility of return in the near future.

In an interview with "Die Kirche" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741) (a weekly church newspaper in Berlin and Brandenburg) on 14 April, Brauer said: "We are witnessing the blackmail of religion. But we shouldn't abandon the truth of the gospel, because then we have no future." He also noted that prayers in Russian churches cannot specify "that we have in mind the people in Ukraine, the images and horrors of the war".

On 18 May, President Vladimir Putin removed Brauer from the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations.

It now appears that a second senior religious leader left Russia after the invasion because of pressure from state authorities to support the war in Ukraine. Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, travelled to Hungary in March and has now settled in Israel after spending time in Eastern Europe. His daughter-in-law Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, a New York-based journalist, wrote on Twitter on 7 June that the Rabbi and his wife Dara Goldschmidt had been "put under pressure by the authorities to publicly support the 'special military operation' – and refused".

"As the terrible war against Ukraine unfolded over the last few months, I could not remain silent, viewing so much human suffering. I went to assist the refugees in Eastern Europe and spoke out against the war," Goldschmidt said in a statement on Twitter on 7 July. "As time progressed, despite re-electing me to the position of Chief Rabbi last month, it became clear that the Jewish community of Moscow would be endangered by me remaining in my position. Sad as I am, in the circumstances, it is clearly in the interest of the future of the community that I now leave my post."

In March, as Russia's war against Ukraine was intensifying, the FSB security service warned local religious leaders not to publicly oppose the war (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741). In one region, a Protestant pastor noted, at least three fellow pastors received such individual warnings. "Such warnings don't take place now," the pastor told Forum 18 on 15 July. "Those [March warnings] were enough for everyone."

Forum 18 wrote to the federal Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office in Moscow on 28 July to ask whether the state authorities had put pressure on religious leaders to support the so-called "special military operation" and, if so, why and in what way. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Moscow on 2 August.

Orthodox opposition to war

Many of the religious believers who have opposed the war have been Russian Orthodox, both of the Moscow Patriarchate and other branches.

On 10 March, a court fined Fr Ioann Burdin of the Moscow Patriarchate's Kostroma Diocese (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725) one month's average local wages for online remarks and a Sunday sermon in church condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and stressing the importance of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill". The court decision is "a ban not only on expressing one's opinion but also even on professing one's religious beliefs", Fr Ioann told

Forum 18. He has appealed against the fine "so that life is not a bed of roses for the authorities and judges" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738).

In early April, a court fined Deacon Sergey Shcherbyuk nearly one month's average local wages for allegedly "discrediting the Russian armed forces" in conversations with parishioners and colleagues (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738). He was accused of talking with one parishioner about Ukrainian civilian deaths and expressing the opinion that everything could have been resolved without military hostilities. He was also accused of asking a church worker edit a post she had made in the parish VKontakte group, which asked people to "pray for the soldiers fighting the Nazis and Bandera".

In early April, Fr Nikolay Platonov, a parish priest from Chelyabinsk Metropolitanate (Moscow Patriarchate), requested to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat, meaning that he remains a priest but is not formally employed in a parish, cathedral, or other institution) because, as he said in a video explaining his decision, "I can't be silent any longer". He had in a video strongly criticised Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin for the war, and stated (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741): "After [this video], our church hierarchy will inevitably want to get rid of me with some shameful [legal] article. When a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church starts to speak the truth, he immediately automatically becomes a paedophile, or a thief, or a drug addict."

Fr Nikolay was among nearly 300 Russian Orthodox priests to sign an open letter calling for "reconciliation and an immediate ceasefire" in Ukraine (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true). The letter criticised the suppression of protests against the war, and stated that "we believe that the people of Ukraine should make their choice on their own, not at gunpoint, without pressure from West or East".

Another priest who signed the open letter, Fr Sergey Titkov, also requested to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat) on 30 March "for health reasons", according to his letter to Ryazan Diocese, which he posted on his Facebook and VKontakte pages. His bishop Metropolitan Mark of Ryazan and Mikhailov had on 29 March demanded explanations for his refusal to pray a prayer issued by Metropolitan Kirill (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741) praying among other things that God "thwart the intentions of foreigners who want to take up arms against Holy Russia". On 30 March Metropolitan Mark also demanded a written explanation of Fr Sergey's posts on his VKontakte page condemning the war in Ukraine.

"Whether there was pressure on the bishop from the authorities, I don't know," Fr Sergey told Forum 18 on 7 May (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741). Had he not stepped down as he did, he believes the diocese would have transferred him to another church where the senior priest would report to the bishop on his conduct, "that I didn't read the new 'Prayer for Peace', and so on", or "to live in some monastery as a reader, which I would have refused. That is, they would have rattled my nerves, and other people's, and it would all have ended the same way. I wanted it over as soon as possible, and not to have it turn into a circus."

In 2019, Fr Sergey was also among Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) priests who signed an open letter in defence of people arrested during protests in Moscow (<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/09/17/82014-samo-pravosudie-prevraschaetsya-v-nasmeshku-i-massovyy-besporjadok>) against the authorities' refusal to register opposition candidates for local elections.

Similarly, Deacon Dmitry Bayev wrote to the Vyatka Diocese on 25 February, asking to be made supernumerary (pochislit za shtat) (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741) until "the situation is settled". He explained that "as a Christian holding the rank of deacon", he could not participate in services at which prayers were offered for the government and armed forces. He posted the letter to social media on the same day. The Diocese then banned him from serving, and the Investigative Committee opened a case against him on 23 March under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraph d (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation based on political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or based on hatred or enmity against any social group").

Bayev is now outside Russia, he told Idel Realii on 12 April, and does not intend to return, "because I was given to understand that as soon as I cross the border in the opposite direction, they will immediately 'take me in'".

Forum 18 wrote to the Moscow Patriarchate's legal department in Moscow on 28 July to ask what the Patriarchate is doing to support believers who are prosecuted for voicing their opinions on events in Ukraine, and whether state authorities have requested that dioceses put pressure on clergy not to speak out, or whether dioceses have acted on their own initiative. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Moscow on 2 August.

Non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox priests opposing war

Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov of St Petersburg posted videos on his YouTube channel criticising Russia's invasion of Ukraine from a Christian perspective. He argued that "those who have unleashed aggression will not be in heaven" and "if you are not disturbed by what is going on in Ukraine, this outrage, then .. you are not Christians" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2756).

Fr Ioann belongs to the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which did not join other parts of ROCOR when they joined the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007.

Fr Ioann was arrested on 7 June, and is now in St Petersburg's Kresty prison awaiting trial for the new criminal offence of disseminating "knowingly false information" about the military (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737). St Petersburg Investigative Committee has not responded to Forum 18's questions. "He is aware that he may be sentenced to a long term of imprisonment – up to 10 years – but he does not intend to deviate from his convictions," says his lawyer Leonid Krikun.

St Petersburg City Court upheld Fr Ioann's initial detention order on 20 July. The Support for Political Prisoners, Memorial human rights group announced on 27 July that it considers Fr Ioann a political prisoner (<https://telegra.ph/Kurmoyarov-Dmitrij-Valerevich-otec-Ioann-07-27>).

On 28 July, the city's Kalinin District Court ordered that Fr Ioann should be kept in custody for another month.

Forum 18 sent a request for information via the St Petersburg Investigative Committee's website (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2756) on 5 July, including the questions:

- why the expression of religious views on war in general and in Ukraine was considered distribution of false information about the Russian Armed Forces;
- and why it was deemed necessary to put him in detention.

Forum 18 had received no reply by the end of the working day in St Petersburg of 2 August.

"The [district] court took into account that Kurmoyarov is accused of committing a serious crime against public security, which may be punished by a period of imprisonment significantly exceeding three years," Darya Lebedeva, head of the joint court system press service for St Petersburg, told Forum 18 on 2 August.

Other grounds for his detention included the fact that Kurmoyarov has relatives abroad, including in Ukraine, that he had previously planned to leave Russia because of his dispute with the Moscow Patriarchate, and that he is a member of a Ukrainian-based branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which is not part of the Moscow Patriarchate.

This "taken together, gives reason to suppose that, if at liberty and not isolated from society, Kurmoyarov may continue his criminal activity, conceal himself from investigators and the court, destroy evidence and otherwise interfere with the criminal proceedings", Lebedeva added. "The court of appeal agreed with these conclusions."

Fr Nikandr Pinchuk, rector of the parish of St. Simeon Verkhotursky in Verkhoturys, Sverdlovsk Region, had written about the "violation of the Holy Commandments by those who should preach those commandments .. [and] about demons and antichrists among the Russian authorities". Russia's attack on Ukraine is "a mortal sin", he added to Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2757).

Fr Pinchuk also belongs to the branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which did not join other parts of ROCOR when they joined the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007.

Fr Pinchuk is under investigation under Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), which punishes a repeat offence of "discrediting" the Armed Forces. "But I have committed no crime," Fr Pinchuk said. "I am a priest and have the right to denounce evil (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2757), regardless of who is involved and the political situation." He remains a suspect and has not been arrested.

Administrative and criminal punishments for opposing war

New punishments for criticising Russia's actions in its war against Ukraine entered legal force as soon as President Vladimir Putin signed them into law on 4 March.

These punishments are contained in:

- Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), which is used against apparently any form of anti-war statements either in public spaces or online;
- Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of

credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation");

- and Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in order to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, [and] maintain international peace and security, including public calls to prevent the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for these purposes, or equally, aimed at discrediting the exercise by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers outside the territory of the Russian Federation for these purposes").

If an individual commits an offence covered by Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 more than once within a year, they may be prosecuted under the corresponding Criminal Code Article 280.3.

Administrative and criminal cases brought for opposing war

Since early March, people have been prosecuted for posters or social media posts quoting rap lyrics, the Russian Constitution, and even Putin's own speeches. Police initiated two recent cases for using quotation marks around the phrase "special military operation" and for using a sad emoji and thumbs-up sign on anti-war posts on the Odnoklassniki social network.

Between 24 February and 20 July, there were 16,380 detentions of people protesting against the war in Ukraine, OVD-Info reported on 22 July: "Since 24 February in Russia and annexed Crimea, protest against the war in Ukraine has not stopped. Mass demonstrations have quietened down, but news of detentions for pickets, publications on the internet, and other expressions of protest are coming in every day."

Police initiated 3,303 cases under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 between 5 March and 14 July (on average, 35 every working day), according to Interior Ministry documents shared by the Net Freedoms Project (Setevye Svobody) on its Telegram channel.

For example, police detained artist and activist Ivan Lyubimov in Yekaterinburg on 28 July for a religiously themed poster displaying UN-calculated civilian casualty figures for Ukraine. His poster depicted a dead Jesus apparently being cradled by the Virgin Mary, with a tree (perhaps evoking the "tree of life .. for the healing of the nations" from the Book of Revelation) growing out of the wound in his side – several of its branches end in the names and coats of arms of the Ukrainian towns of Odessa, Bucha, Vinnytsia, Chasiv Yar, Kharkiv, and Mariupol. Underneath is a quotation from Luke 20:38 – "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive". Above this is the statement: "Since 24 February in Ukraine 12,272 civilians have become victims of the war".

Lyubimov, who has been detained for similar protests on several previous occasions (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2758), told OVD-Info that he had been charged under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737).

Many other protestors against the war have also used explicitly religious imagery (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738).

On 3 July, Galina Borisova, an actor and a parishioner of the Catholic Church of St Louis, Moscow, pinned a piece of paper to the church's Russian flag. The paper read "No bellum" and "There is no place for the flag of an aggressor state beside the flag of the Holy See". A nun removed the paper after a few minutes, by which time about 50 people had already seen it, according to posts on the parish Facebook group.

Borisova's action was picked up on municipal CCTV and she was identified by facial recognition technology, she explained on 21 July in the Facebook group. On 1 August, police registered a case against her at Moscow's Meshchansky District Court under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737).

Aleksandr Ivanov, editor of the open Orthodox encyclopaedia drevo-info.ru, was fined 45,000 Roubles on 29 July at Kaluga District Court. He had been charged under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) for posting an anti-war statement on the encyclopaedia's homepage (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2758).

Forum 18 wrote to Kaluga Region Interior Ministry on 13 July to ask why Ivanov's statement made before Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 entered legal force was considered grounds for prosecution, and why the expression of a position on events in Ukraine and war in general was deemed to "discredit" the Russian Armed Forces. Forum 18 received no response by the end of the working day in Kaluga on 2 August.

Ivanov intends to appeal, he noted in a post on drevo-info.ru on 30 July: "Most of all I don't like lies. If the law expressly forbade criticising Putin's actions, I would understand the charge. If the law explicitly prohibited the word 'war', there would be no questions. But how can one discredit the goals and tasks of the army without saying a word about these goals and tasks? The rule of law, under which Russia considers itself to be, must operate according to the rules, and not according to concepts."

According to the Black February Telegram channel, investigators opened 72 cases under Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) and 6 cases under Criminal Code Article 280.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) between 4 March and 25 July.

The Criminal Code Article 280.3 cases include Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) priest Fr Nikandr Pinchuk from Verkhoturys in Sverdlovsk Region (see above).

So far, Criminal Code Article 207.3 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") is known to have been used against two people for explicitly religious opposition to the war:

– Nina Belyayeva, a Baptist and Communist municipal deputy from Voronezh Region. During a meeting of Semiluk District Council she called Russia's invasion a war crime (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737). Belyayeva had to raise her voice and repeat herself over the shouting of her fellow deputies: "A Christian is not someone who wears a cross, but someone who follows Christ, for whom the word of God – the authority of Christ – is much higher than the authority of the President .. for a Christian, first of all, the authority of Christ is higher than the opinion of the Patriarch, and if a person obscures Christ with somebody else, then they cannot be a Christian." By the time the case was opened in early April, she had already fled Russia;

- and ROCOR Orthodox priest Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov who has been in pre-trial detention since 7 June (see above).

Website blocking

Since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine, media watchdog Roskomnadzor has blocked access to over 3,000 websites for reasons of "military censorship", according to a 13 July report by digital rights organisation Roskomsvoboda. These include foreign media outlets (such as Radio Free Europe, the BBC, and Deutsche Welle), Russian independent media (Meduza, Mediazona, People of Baykal), and human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch), as well as social networks.

On 7 April, at the request of the General Prosecutor's Office, Roskomnadzor blocked access to the Latvian-based, Russian-language religious news website Baznica.info, which is edited by Pavel Levushkan.

On 24 May, also at the request of the General Prosecutor's Office, Roskomnadzor blocked access to all of the foreign Protestant website InVictory.org. It had previously blocked three pages on the site:

- on 1 April, an appeal to Russian Christians by a Ukrainian Baptist pastor (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741);

- and on 24 May, two articles from 11 March

(<https://www.invictory.org/news/church/31747-v-mariupole-pogibli-pyat-chlenov-mestnyh-tserkvej-dvoe-byli-vzyaty-v-plen>) and 14 March

(<https://www.invictory.org/news/society/31784-v-mariupole-pogiblo-bolee-2-tysyach-mirnyh-zhitelej-sredi-nih-dochka-pastora-gennadiya-mohnenko>) about deaths and detentions among Protestant civilians in Mariupol.

On 31 May, also at the request of the General Prosecutor's Office, Roskomnadzor blocked the entire Public Orthodoxy website (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2756) (publicorthodoxy.org). This is run by the Orthodox Christian Studies Centre at Fordham University in New York. The website has published numerous articles criticising the Moscow Patriarchate's endorsement of the war in Ukraine and Patriarch Kirill's favoured concept of "Russky Mir" ("Russian World"). This concept claims that Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all constitute a single spiritual and cultural space which is supposedly in opposition to the liberal and secular West.

Portal Credo, a religious news website, has gone offline of its own accord after receiving a warning from Roskomnadzor on 22 March, apparently for its coverage of the war in Ukraine. "It remains unclear how it is technically possible to bring the content of the Portal in line with the requirements of [the new law on disseminating 'false information']," editor Aleksandr Soldatov wrote on Facebook on 23 March.

"On the one hand, we can set ourselves the task of limiting publications to 'abstractly religious' topics that do not concern catastrophic events and processes unfolding in the world, as some Russian publications do. On the other hand, such a position, in our opinion, is incompatible with the tasks and meaning of professional journalism and is unlikely to be accepted by our readers. In addition, our civic position is that the Portal has no right – even by means of silence – to justify obvious crimes against humanity."

Founded in 2002, Portal Credo published news and analytical articles on religion in Russia and abroad and was often critical of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Entry bans

Since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, the Russian Foreign Ministry has banned a large number of foreign citizens from entering Russia. The Foreign Ministry continues to add more people to its entry ban list, placing them under what it describes as "personal sanctions, including a ban on entering the Russian Federation".

On 21 May, Russia put many foreign citizens on its entry ban list, including three senior figures in Agudas Chasidei Chabad, the umbrella organisation for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement. All three are US citizens: Yehuda Chaim Krinsky (Secretary), Baruch Shlomo Eliyahu Cunin (member of the board), and Abraham Isaac Shemtov (President).

The Foreign Ministry also included US lawyer Nathan Lewin on the 21 May entry ban list. He represented the Jewish Chabad-Lubavitch movement in long-running but unsuccessful attempts to pressure the Russian authorities to release about 12,000 books, manuscripts and other artefacts seized from the late Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn. He was the spiritual leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, and was arrested and sentenced to death in 1927 during the Soviet period. After worldwide protests he was allowed to leave Russia in 1927 and he died in 1950. His library was long held by the Lenin Library, later the Russian State Library in Moscow. The Foreign Ministry ban list designates the Chabad-Lubavitch movement lawyer only as "Nathan Levin [sic], lawyer".

Four current and former Commissioners of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) were also among those barred on 21 May 2022: Gary Bauer, Gayle Manchin, Anthony Perkins, and Nury Turkel. The Foreign Ministry ban list designates each one with their USCIRF affiliation.

Forum 18 wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow on 28 July to ask why it had banned the Agudas Chasidei Chabad leaders and USCIRF Commissioners from entering Russia. Forum 18 received no reply by the end of the working day in Moscow on 2 August. (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 survey of the general state of freedom of religion and belief in Russia (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2246), as well as Forum 18's survey of the dramatic decline in this freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215)

A personal commentary by the Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (<https://www.sova-center.ru>), Alexander Verkhovsky, about the systemic problems of Russian "anti-extremism" laws (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1468)

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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