

2 November 2023

RUSSIA: Armed raid on Krasnodar Region church

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

In early October, 10 unidentified armed men raided a non-Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church in the southern Krasnodar Region whose clergy have repeatedly spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine. A priest was physically tortured, detained, and charged with "disobeying a police officer" and "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces". "At least five searches took place simultaneously", Fr Iona told Forum 18. The Krasnodar Region branches of the Investigative Committee, Federal Security Service (FSB), Interior Ministry, and National Guard failed to respond to Forum 18's questions about the raid.

In early October, 10 unidentified armed men raided the Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in the southern Krasnodar Region. The Church's Russian Orthodox (but non-Moscow Patriarchate) clergy have repeatedly spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine, both during worship and online. As well as seizing electronic devices and documents, the armed men physically tortured and detained a priest, 32-year-old Hieromonk Iona Sigida. They later charged him with "disobeying a police officer" and "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces", for which he was given two days' short-term imprisonment. He also faces a further court hearing.

The church's 86-year-old Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov was threatened with criminal prosecution for repeat "discreditation" of the Armed Forces. He was in March fined two months' average pension for giving an anti-war sermon in church (see below).

The raid on the church was not the only one. "At least five searches took place simultaneously", Fr Iona told Forum 18. "One in the church, one at Archbishop Viktor's place of registration, one at my place of registration, one at Fr Aleksandr's house church, and the fifth at the place of registration of Fr Aleksandr. All early in the morning" (see below).

It remains unclear which agencies organised and carried out the raid. Neither the armed men nor the officers who interrogated Fr Iona identified themselves. The Krasnodar Region branches of the Investigative Committee, Federal Security Service (FSB), Interior Ministry, and National Guard have failed to respond to Forum 18's questions about the case (see below).

"I was amazed by this level of aggression and anger", Fr Iona told Novaya Gazeta Europe. "And the most important thing is that they entered the church with machine guns. They completely turned everything over .. They scattered everything as if on purpose" (see below).

On 4 October, a court gave Fr Iona two days' short-term imprisonment on the first charge and he will appear in court later in November on the second. There has been no answer to Forum 18's questions about the raid, including why Fr Iona's torturers are not facing criminal prosecution for torture, in line with Russia's obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (see below).

Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov was not detained and has not yet been informed of a criminal case against him, but the church believes that investigative agencies are simply "preparing for the next attack on us", they told Forum 18 on 25 October. The raid "scared many people, but [Archbishop Viktor] and I are not scared and are ready to die or go to prison", Fr Iona told Forum 18. At present, Sunday services are continuing as normal (see below).

Archbishop Viktor told Novaya Gazeta Europe that after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, he would say in his sermons that this was the "lawless seizure and occupation of a foreign country", which led to a visit from the police. "We are led to believe that the Church is outside politics," Archbishop Viktor commented. "This is an insidious, diabolical lie". Fr Iona describes the war in Ukraine as "based on diabolical pride and the obsession of one old Chekist [secret police officer] with building his own fantasy empire. What he is doing is the devil's will" (see below).

"We preach against the propaganda that is on television. Of course, we are afraid of reprisals, but to the extent that we are obligated to speak, we do so because our greatest fear is reprisal from Jesus Christ, whom we serve .. He was repressed, he was crucified on the cross by madmen like our rulers today. And of course, we can end up like Christ when we are crucified and destroyed, but we must be with Christ, and then we will be truly Christian .. Otherwise, we will become separated from God .. So we must do what we do" (see below).

"God will not save you if you do not take action, if you do not have love", Fr Iona concludes in the video. "If you see lawlessness, evil, deceit, and lies triumphing and you do not denounce it, you do not fight it, then you are not a Christian" (see below).

Viktor Pivovarov was ordained a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which opened parishes inside Russia in the early 1990s, and in 2006 became an Archbishop in the Russian [Rossiyskaya] Orthodox Church (RosPTs), which was founded after a series of splits within ROCOR. He now leads a rival branch of RosPTs which he established in 2009 after a further split. It is not in communion with either other parts of ROCOR or the Moscow Patriarchate.

Specific penalties for criticising Russia's actions in its renewed war against Ukraine came into force on 4 March 2022, and Russian courts have so far convicted four people on criminal charges for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds, giving two long jail terms. Also, military courts have now jailed four men for refusing on religious grounds to go to fight in Ukraine. There have also been multiple Administrative Code prosecutions for opposition to the war on religious grounds (see below).

Russia's government has used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion of Ukraine from 24 February 2022 (see below).

March fine for anti-war sermon

In March 2023, a Krasnodar Region court handed Archbishop Viktor a 40,000-Rouble fine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822) under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for an anti-war sermon he had given in church. The fine was the equivalent of about two months' average pension.

Both Archbishop Viktor and Fr Iona have published a number of articles on the church's website which discuss theological approaches to war in general and criticise the Moscow Patriarchate's position on the war in Ukraine.

Archbishop Viktor and Fr Iona also speak at length in a video made about their community by Novaya Gazeta Europe (the European edition of independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta), explicitly condemning the war as "cursed both by God and by people" (Archbishop Viktor) and "based on diabolical pride and the obsession of one old Chekist [secret police officer] with building his own fantasy empire" (Fr Iona).

Forum 18 wrote to the Krasnodar Region branch of the Interior Ministry and the joint court press service for Krasnodar Region on 3 April, asking them to clarify which statements of Pivovarov's could be considered "discreditation" of the Russian armed forces (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822) and why. The Interior Ministry press office responded the same day, refusing to answer Forum 18's questions as "the case is with the court".

Forum 18 had received no reply from the court press service as of 2 November.

"Because I'm a Christian, unlike you"

At 6am on 3 October, there was "an enormous din" outside the Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in Slavyansk-na-Kubani. Hieromonk Iona Sigida, who was alone inside (Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov was still in the adjoining house), opened the door to find about 10 armed men.

"They burst into the church with machine guns, in camouflage, in SOBR [Special Rapid Response Unit] balaclavas, actually with machine guns, like soldiers", Fr Iona told Novaya Gazeta Europe on 8 October (<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/10/08/neugodnye-sviashchenniki>).

(Novaya Gazeta Europe was launched in Riga in April 2022, after censorship in Russia forced Novaya Gazeta to suspend publication and many of its staff left the country. Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor blocked Novaya Gazeta Europe's website on 29 April 2022, and on 28 June 2023, the Justice Ministry declared it an "undesirable organisation".)

"They pinion me on the floor. And [one of them] puts his knee on my back and presses me down, so that I'm suffocating," Fr Iona added. "The following dialogue took place between us: 'Well, tell me, what kind of article did you write there? Why did you do that?' 'Because I'm a Christian, unlike you'."

(Fr Iona notes that this was a reference to an article he had posted on the church website on 28 September 2023, entitled "The Cult of War", in which he discusses how "the cult of war is an integral part of all totalitarian anti-human regimes". He refers to prophecies in the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, and criticises the "militarisation" of the Moscow Patriarchate.)

The men – who did not identify themselves – searched both the house and the church, including the sanctuary, keeping Fr Iona and Archbishop Viktor separated throughout.

"They moved about out of control, and took everything they wanted, turning everything upside down", the two priests wrote in their account of the raid, posted on the church website on 10 October (<https://eshatologia.org/biblioteka/materiali/kratkoe-opisanie-proizoshedshego-vo-vtornik-3-okt-2023-g>).

The armed men seized "at least three bags of items" – computers, phones, documents, official church stamps, keys, and all the money they could find, including from a donation box which they had broken open – and did not give either of the priests an inventory or receipt. None of these items has since been returned.

When the armed men went upstairs and found a computer, "they began shouting insults and asking questions". They struck Fr Iona in the head, face, and stomach – when he cited Article 51 of the Constitution (according to which nobody is obliged to testify against themselves), "they became very angry [and] began to use force even more".

When they saw Ukrainian websites in the computer's browser, they called Fr Iona a "Nazi" and "fascist", and forcibly tried to shave his hair and beard with an electric razor they had found in the search, threatening to send him to serve in the army. They stopped when Fr Iona began to have convulsions because of an existing problem with his spine, according to Fr Iona's comments to Novaya Gazeta Europe on 8 October.

"I was amazed by this level of aggression and anger", Fr Iona told Novaya Gazeta Europe. "And the most important thing is that they entered the church with machine guns. They completely turned everything over .. They scattered everything as if on purpose".

The armed men then summoned a local police officer and two witnesses (whom Fr Iona described as 18-year-olds) and stated that Fr Iona had resisted them and tried to escape, and had refused to show them his passport.

The armed men had the police officer draw up two administrative protocols – one under Administrative Code Article 19.3, Part 1 ("Disobeying a lawful order or demand of a police officer, soldier, penal system employee, or National Guard officer in connection with the performance of their duties to protect public order and ensure public safety, as well as obstruction of their performance of official duties"), and one under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), with reference to Fr Iona's article "The Cult of War".

Fr Iona told Novaya Gazeta Europe that his passport had been lying on a table and the men had simply picked it up.

The armed men then took Fr Iona to the local police station. Archbishop Viktor was not assaulted, detained or charged with any offence, but the men threatened him with criminal prosecution for repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces (Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1).

"Fingerprinted, palmprinted, and photographed, just like a criminal"

At the police station on 3 October, two people questioned Fr Iona, ostensibly as a witness, about articles on the church website and the video about the church and Archbishop Viktor which Novaya Gazeta Europe had posted on its YouTube channel on 5 May 2023.

"One was probably an investigator, but he didn't say anything about himself – he just waved his fists, threatening to beat me up again, and brought scissors to cut my hair", Fr Iona told Forum 18 on 25 October. "The second, who asked the most questions, and about a wide variety of things unrelated to the topic, was probably an FSB officer, and was wearing a mask – like a medical mask, but khaki. He was clearly of a higher intellectual level than the first, and is aware of all the oppositionists."

The interrogation lasted three to four hours, Fr Iona told Forum 18. Afterwards, police took him to a cell. According to the account of what happened on the church website, "Only then, when he asked for clarification, was he told for the first time that he was being detained for disobeying police officers. Other police officers at the station did not understand what had happened and behaved correctly and politely."

The next morning, 4 October, a police van took him to Slavyansk City Court, where, "due to a number of circumstances", Fr Iona had to spend the entire day, despite his hearing appearing to last only 20 minutes. He pleaded not guilty, but Judge Natalya Kovalchuk convicted him under Administrative Code Article 19.3, Part 1 ("Disobeying a lawful order or demand of a police officer, soldier, penal system employee, or National Guard officer in connection with the performance of their duties to protect public order and ensure public safety, as well as obstruction of their performance of official duties").

Judge Kovalchuk sentenced Fr Iona to two days' short-term imprisonment, according to the court decision seen by Forum 18.

Because he had already spent the previous night in a police cell, Fr Iona was released from the detention centre – where "he was fingerprinted, palmprinted, and photographed, just like a criminal" – the following day, 5 October.

Five raids by unidentified armed personnel

In their statement on the church website on 10 October, both priests disavowed all documents they had signed during and after the raid. They noted that Fr Iona's signature on the protocol of his interrogation (five pages of which he corrected) was "given under unfree circumstances", and that Archbishop Viktor claimed that he was put under pressure to sign documents that he could not read, as he has cataracts and glaucoma in both eyes.

Fr Iona and Archbishop Viktor still do not know which investigative agency organised the raid on their church. Neither the armed men who assaulted Fr Iona during the search nor the officers who interrogated him identified themselves. "When I asked who they were, they just laughed at me [and] insulted me and no one answered anything", Fr Iona told Forum 18.

On the church website, Fr Iona and Archbishop Viktor describe the men as belonging to "SOBR" (Spetsialny Otryad Bystrogo Reagirovaniya), the Special Rapid Response Unit which has been part of the National Guard (Rosgvardiya) since 2016.

On 24 October, Forum 18 wrote to the Krasnodar Region branches of the Investigative Committee, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Interior Ministry, as well as the Slavyansk District Police Department, and asked them the following questions:

- why armed force had been considered necessary (especially as Archbishop Viktor is 86 years old);
- whether the men who had beaten and threatened Fr Iona had been suspended from duty and placed under investigation with a view to criminal prosecution for torture, in line with Russia's obligations under the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2693);
- why Fr Iona had been prosecuted for "disobeying a police officer" when he had neither resisted nor refused to present his passport;
- why the expression of religious opinion on war in general was taken to be "discreditation" of the Russian Armed Forces, especially as Fr Iona had not mentioned the armed forces in his "Cult of War" article;
- whether and on what grounds a criminal case has been opened against Archbishop Viktor.

Only the Krasnodar Region Investigative Committee responded, directing Forum 18 to contact the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow. Forum 18 sent the same questions to the Federal Investigative Committee the same day, 24 October, but has received no reply.

Forum 18 also wrote to the Krasnodar Region National Guard, asking why armed force had been considered necessary, whether the men who had beaten and threatened Fr Iona had been suspended from duty and placed under investigation, and why Fr Iona had been prosecuted for "disobeying a police officer". Forum 18 had received no response by the afternoon of 2 November.

The raid on the church was not the only one. "At least five searches took place simultaneously", Fr Iona told Forum 18. "One in the church, one at Archbishop Viktor's place of registration, one at my place of registration, one at Fr Aleksandr's house church, and the fifth at the place of registration of Fr Aleksandr. All early in the morning."

Fr Aleksandr Alekseyev is the priest of another RosPTs parish in the village of Olginskaya in Primorsko-Akhtarsk District, about 100 kms (60 miles) from Slavyansk-na-Kubani. Fr Iona and Archbishop Viktor describe him in their 10 October statement as "a blind, infirm, disabled person who has recently experienced a heart attack and stroke, and other illnesses". They note that Fr Aleksandr was not present during the raids. It appears that he has so far not been detained, questioned, or charged with any offence.

"I think they're preparing for the next attack on us"

The raid on the church "scared many people", Fr Iona told Forum 18 on 25 October. "But Vladyka [Archbishop Viktor] and I are not scared and are ready to die or go to prison." Sunday services, he said, are currently being held as usual.

Judge Yuliya Pelyushenko of Slavyansk-na-Kubani City Court initially returned to police the case against Fr Iona under Administrative Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"). According to court records, the protocol had been "drawn up by unauthorised persons". Police resubmitted the case, however, on 20 October, and a hearing is due to take place on 20 November, according to the court website.

No criminal case against Archbishop Viktor appears on the court website and he does not know as yet whether one has been opened.

"For now [the investigators] are silent, but most likely they are just preparing for the next steps", Fr Iona told Forum 18. "They took several hard drives and flash drives – they're probably still studying the materials on them." He added that the searchers had also taken "all the property documents they could find", including plans of the church buildings, and had threatened to close the church. "I think they're preparing for the next attack on us."

"If you see lawlessness triumphing and you do not denounce it, then you are not a Christian"

Fr Iona believes that any criminal case against Archbishop Viktor would be based on the articles he has posted on the church website throughout the year, and on a story about the church published by Novaya Gazeta Europe on 5 May 2023 (<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/10/08/neugodnye-sviashchenniki>). Fr Iona commented to the same paper on 8 October that the men who carried out the raid appeared very interested in this story, and that it "made them very angry".

Novaya Gazeta Europe's piece about the church (<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/05/05/ia-zhdu-ctoby-menia-ubili-ili-posadili>) includes a 17-minute YouTube video showing parish life and worship and interviews with Archbishop Viktor and Fr Iona about their opposition to the war in Ukraine and the pressure they have come under from the authorities.

Referring to his conviction in March under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1, Archbishop Viktor says that he told investigators and the court that "If there are foreign tanks under our windows, that means we are at war with an enemy, but if our tanks are in a neighbouring country, and our soldiers are savagely torturing the people, waging an aggressive war, then such a war is cursed both by God and by people".

Archbishop Viktor also recalls that after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, he would say in his sermons that this was the "lawless seizure and occupation of a foreign country", which led to a visit from the police. "We are led to believe that the Church is outside politics," Archbishop Viktor commented. "This is an insidious, diabolical lie".

Fr Iona describes the war in Ukraine as "based on diabolical pride and the obsession of one old Chekist [secret police officer] with building his own fantasy empire. What he is doing is the devil's will".

He attempts to explain why he and the Archbishop are so open in their opposition to the government's policies:

"We preach against the propaganda that is on television. Of course, we are afraid of reprisals, but to the extent that we are obligated to speak, we do so because our greatest fear is reprisal from Jesus Christ, whom we serve .. He was repressed, he was crucified on the cross by madmen like our rulers today. And of course, we can end up like Christ when we are crucified and destroyed, but we must be with Christ, and then we will be truly Christian .. Otherwise, we will become separated from God .. So we must do what we do".

"God will not save you if you do not take action, if you do not have love", Fr Iona concludes in the video. "If you see lawlessness, evil, deceit, and lies triumphing and you do not denounce it, you do not fight it, then you are not a Christian."

"Discreditation" and "False information"

Specific penalties for criticising Russia's actions in its renewed war against Ukraine came into force on 4 March 2022. These include 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 statement either in public spaces or online, and 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").

If individuals commit an offence covered by Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 more than once within a year, they may be prosecuted under Criminal Code Article 280.3 ("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").

On 28 March 2023, a series of amendments to the Criminal Code came into legal force (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822), increasing penalties for disseminating "false information" about and repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces (Criminal Code Articles 207.3 and 280.3). The amendments also widen the definition of these offences (and of Administrative Code Article 20.3.3) to include criticism of "volunteer formations, organisations and individuals who assist in the fulfilment of tasks assigned to the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" (that is, private mercenary units).

Under 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"), Part 1, the maximum prison sentence was raised from 3 years to 5 years. Under Part 2, the same offence if resulting in "death by negligence", harm to health or property, or mass public disorder, the penalty was raised from 5 years to 7 years.

Under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information

on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Part 1, the maximum prison sentence was raised from 3 years to 5 years (Part 2 remains unchanged).

Two imprisoned, two fined for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds

Russian courts have so far convicted four people on criminal charges for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds:

– on 17 October 2022, Verkhoturysky District Court (Sverdlovsk Region) fined Fr Nikandr Igoryevich Pinchuk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2783) (of a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in communion with neither the Moscow Patriarchate nor RosPTs) 100,000 Roubles under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 for posts on VKontakte. In the posts, he accused the Russian army of shelling Ukrainian cities, called it the "horde of the Antichrist", and praised the "perseverance" of the defenders of "the city of Mary, Mariupol";

– on 30 March 2023, Timiryazevsky District Court in Moscow handed 63-year-old Mikhail Yuryevich Simonov a 7-year prison sentence (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2822) under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2 for two online comments about the war ("Killing children and women, on Channel One [television] we sing songs. We, Russia, have become godless [bezbozhniki]. Forgive us, Lord!"; and "Russian pilots are bombing children"). His appeal was rejected on 25 July 2023 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852). His prison address is:

601122 Vladimirskaya oblast,

Petushinsky rayon,

g. Pokrov, ul. Frantsa Shtolverka 6,

FKU Ispravitelnaya koloniya - 2 UFSIN Rossii po Vladimirskoy oblasti

– on 7 August 2023, Soviet District Court in Tomsk fined Anna Sergeyevna Chagina 100,000 Roubles (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852) under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 for making anti-war posts on VKontakte after first being convicted for displaying a poster reading "Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)" at an anti-war protest. She appealed unsuccessfully at Tomsk Regional Court on 26 October;

– on 31 August 2023, Kalinin District Court in St Petersburg sentenced Fr Ioann Valeryevich Kurmoyarov (of the same branch of ROCOR as Fr Nikandr) to 3 years' imprisonment (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2857) under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraphs G and D for posting videos condemning the war on his YouTube channel; between 13 September and 17 October, he and his lawyer lodged four appeals, but St Petersburg City Court has not yet listed any hearings.

Investigators have also opened three criminal cases against people who have left Russia:

– Nina Aleksandrovna Belyayeva (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2809), a Baptist and Communist municipal deputy from Voronezh (Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 1);

– Fr Aleksandr Nikolayevich Dombrovsky (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2809), a Moscow Patriarchate priest from Bryansk Region who was told by local police that the FSB security service had opened a case against him (Article unknown);

– Yury Kirillovich Sipko (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2852), Baptist pastor and former head of the Russian Baptist Union (under investigation under Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2, Paragraph D), whose home in Moscow the Investigative Committee raided on 8 August 2023; they could not arrest him as he had already left the country, and they have now had him placed on the Interior Ministry's wanted list.

Also, military courts have now jailed four men for refusing on religious grounds to go to fight in Ukraine (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2865).

In Vladivostok, Baptist Vyacheslav Reznichenko entered the prison colony-settlement on 18 September to start his 2 year, 6 month term. In Murmansk, a court handed long-serving contract soldier Maksim Makushin, a Pentecostal Christian, a term of 2 years and 8 months "for refusing to kill Ukrainians". He lodged an appeal on 16 October, according to the website of Murmansk Garrison Military Court, but the Northern Fleet Military Court has not yet listed any hearings. Neither courts nor prosecutors answered Forum 18's questions why the men were not allowed to do alternative civilian service.

Lawyers and human rights defenders agree that Russian federal legislation does not provide for alternative civilian service (ACS) for reservists during mobilisation. They insist, however, that the Constitution guarantees the right to ACS in any case, and that men who object to fighting on religious or other conscientious grounds should therefore lodge applications for ACS and go to court when they are refused (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2797).

Administrative Code punishments, pressure against religious leaders

There have also been prosecutions under 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 public or online protest, including against individuals opposing the war based on their religious beliefs (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737).

The first such prosecution was of Fr Ioann Burdin of the Moscow Patriarchate's Kostroma Diocese, who was on 10 March 2022 fined for posting an anti-war statement on the website (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725) of his parish in Karabanovo and for giving a Sunday sermon in church condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the sermon, he stressed the importance of the 6th 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.

Russia's government has used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2763) of Ukraine from 24 February 2022. These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2741), 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.

On 27 January 2023, Buddhist former leader Telo Tulku Rinpoche – who left Russia in 2022 - became the first religious leader to be declared a "foreign agent" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2817) by the Justice Ministry. Similar warnings and prosecutions have been used against many Russians who express opposition to the war for any reason.

Among the thousands of Russians detained and taken to court for protesting against the war, a small number have done so from a religious perspective or using explicitly religious imagery. Among them was Moscow Patriarchate Deacon Sergey Shcherbyuk. A court in Samara fined him about one month's average local wage (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2738) in April 2022 for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" in conversations with parishioners and colleagues. One of them apparently reported him to the Interior Ministry.

Similarly, in April 2023, a Moscow court fined Rostislav Charushin for a poster quoting three of the Bible's Ten Commandments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2817) which police said "clearly expresses a negative attitude towards the use of the Armed Forces". (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 then 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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