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## RUSSIA: Anti-war Christian preacher facing criminal prosecutions

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

*In 2023, Christian preacher Eduard Charov was fined for social media comments, including the remark: "would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" He now awaits criminal trial for further anti-war posts "discrediting" the armed forces. "Most likely, it will all end with a prison term for me", he noted. Information on Charov's case "is not subject to disclosure", the Investigative Committee said. Orthodox priest Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov, jailed for also criticising Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective, was freed at the end of his sentence.*

An independent Christian preacher from the Urals is awaiting criminal trial on charges of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian armed forces and state bodies (Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1). "Most likely, it will all end with a prison term for me", Eduard Charov noted. He is currently banned from leaving his home district and using the telephone or internet.

Charov and his wife run a shelter for homeless people – originally called "For the Sake of Christ" when it was a state-registered organisation - in his home in the Sverdlovsk Region village of Savinovo. "During conversations with Eduard, he has recommended himself as a sympathetic and caring person, ready to come to the aid of people who find themselves in difficult circumstances," the Russian Orthodox priest in the village has noted (see below).

Charov first faced administrative prosecution in spring 2023 for comments on social media, including the remark addressed to "church people": "would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" (see below).

Charov's second alleged offence, for which he is currently facing prosecution, involved reposting a quotation about patriotism. He could not have faced criminal charges under Article 280.3, Part 1 had he not already been punished under the associated Administrative Code Article (see below).

The Investigative Committee in Krasnoufimsk (Sverdlovsk Region) has also charged Charov under Criminal Code Article 205.3, Part 2 ("Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism, using the internet") for what his wife Inna called a "sarcastic comment" on another user's post on the VKontakte social network in September 2023 (see below).

Criminal Code Article 205.3, Part 2 carries a possible punishment of 5 to 7 years' imprisonment or a fine of 300,000 to 1 million Roubles, while Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 carries penalties of up to five years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 300,000 Roubles. The court will try Charov on both charges together, but has not yet registered the cases (see below).

Forum 18 asked Krasnoufimsk Inter-District Prosecutor's Office, Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee and the press service of the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow why reposting a quotation is considered "discreditation" of the state bodies of the Russian Federation, when the quotation does not mention Russia or any specific state institution, and Charov did not add any comment.

Aleksandr Shulga of Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee responded to Forum 18 that any information on Charov's case "is not subject to disclosure". Krasnoufimsk's Acting Inter-District Prosecutor Ilya Kashin, told Forum 18: "Preliminary investigation data may be disclosed only with the permission of the investigator." the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow did not respond (see below).

Since Charov's first (administrative) conviction for "discreditation", local authorities have put increasing pressure on him and the shelter for homeless and destitute people he and his wife run in Savinovo. Some volunteers have stopped helping at his shelter (see below).

Orthodox priest Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov, who also criticised Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective on his YouTube channel, was released from prison in St Petersburg on 1 August after completing his sentence for "disseminating false information about the Russian armed forces" (Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2) (see below).

In Slavyansk-na-Kubani in Krasnodar Region, the city administration asked a court to order the demolition of an Orthodox church (not part of the Moscow Patriarchate) whose Archbishop has been prosecuted for vehemently opposing the war in his writings and sermons. On 18 June, the court refused to grant this request, concluding that the statute of limitations on such proceedings had long expired. Although the administration does not appear to have appealed, the church community still fears further pressure from the authorities (see below).

#### Pressure on religious-inspired opposition to Russia's war against Ukraine

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.

On 4 March 2022, specific Criminal Code and Administrative Code penalties for "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) came into force, alongside Criminal Code penalties for spreading "false information" about the Armed Forces' actions. Some of the criminal penalties were increased on 28 March 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)).

Although the Russian government introduced Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) and the associated Criminal Code Article 280.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) on 4 March 2022 in order to punish "discreditation" of the Armed Forces, amendments to the law on 25 March 2022 expanded the definition of this offence to include "discreditation" of "the execution by state bodies of the Russian Federation of their powers for the specified purposes", ie. protecting Russian interests and "maintaining international peace and security".

The government has used a range of tactics to pressure religious leaders into supporting the renewed invasion of Ukraine ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)). These tactics include warnings to senior and local religious leaders, and prosecuting and fining religious believers and clergy who have publicly opposed the war. Similar warnings and prosecutions have been used against many Russians who express opposition to the war for any reason.

Since February 2022, courts have on criminal charges jailed two and fined three ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2904](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904)) for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds. Investigators have also opened three criminal cases against people who have left Russia ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2904](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904)), and have placed them on the Federal Wanted List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)). If they are caught in Russia, arrive in Russia, or are caught in states that are friendly to Russia (such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), they risk immediate arrest. Their family and acquaintances in Russia are under surveillance, including wiretapping, to monitor possible contacts.

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

The first prosecution under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for criticising the war from a religious basis was of Fr Ioann Burdin of the Moscow Patriarchate's Kostroma Diocese. He was fined on 10 March 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2725](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725)) for posting an anti-war statement on the website 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 Bible's 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 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2725](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2725)).

The first prosecution under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) ("Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation") for criticising the war from a religious basis was of Nina Belyayeva, a Protestant who is a Communist Party municipal deputy ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2737](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2737)). During a 22 March 2022 Semiluk District Council meeting she among other criticisms called the invasion a war crime, asserting over the shouting of 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.." Belyayeva told Forum 18 that she had expected criminal prosecution, and by the time the case was opened she had already fled Russia. She was then placed on the Federal Wanted List ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)), so if she is caught in Russia, arrives in Russia, or is caught in states that are friendly to Russia (such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan), she risks immediate arrest. Her family and acquaintances in Russia are under surveillance, including wiretapping, to monitor possible contacts.

Ever-increasing internet censorship has seen websites and materials blocked ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2934](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.

"Discrediting" the Russian state authorities

Christian preacher Eduard Aleksandrovich Charov (born 18 July 1971), who with his wife runs a shelter in his home in the village of Savinovo in Sverdlovsk Region, is facing criminal prosecution for further online comments opposing Russia's war in Ukraine.

On 23 May 2024, Krasnoufimsk Investigative Department of the Investigative Committee opened a case against Charov under Criminal Code Article 280.3, Part 1 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) ("Public actions aimed at discrediting the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation").

According to a letter and two-page Investigative Committee resolution, posted on Charov's VKontakte page on 27 June, he stands accused of making a social media post judged by unnamed experts to contain "linguistic and psychological signs of persuading [readers] of the negative nature of the goals of Russian state bodies' use of their powers, that is, their discreditation".

Investigators have combined the case with their prosecution of Charov under Criminal Code Article 205.2 (see below), his wife Inna Charova told Govorit Ne Moskva on 29 June (<https://nemoskva.net/2024/06/29/esli-ego-reshili-posadit-to-posadyat-zhena-osnovatelya-sverdlovskogo-priyuta-dlya-bezdomnyh-razkazala-o-vtorom-ugolovnom-dele-protiv-svoego-muzha/>). Charov is likely to appear in court on both charges in August, she wrote on 3 July on his VKontakte page. She took over his VKontakte page in February, after investigators placed him under specific restrictions as part of the earlier criminal case. Krasnoufimsk District Court has not yet registered the cases, so it is as yet unknown when hearings may begin.

"I don't understand politics, but I see what's going on in the country. Murderers and rapists are pardoned, and honest people are simply jailed for their words", Inna commented to Takiye Dela on 3 April, after the initiation of the first criminal case. "You can sit it out, keep quiet, without attracting the attention of the authorities, but then you will still answer to God. You should not fear the judgment of people, but of God."

September 2023 post

Eduard Charov, who has consistently opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and offered sanctuary to men fleeing military mobilisation, made the post which triggered his criminal prosecution on 3 September 2023, according to the Investigative Committee documents.

Charov reposted, without comment, an image from another user's VKontakte page, consisting of white text on a black background, which says in Russian: "A patriot is someone who wants to make their country better, the people richer, and the government more honest and fair. Not someone who justifies total destitution and corruption with imaginary greatness and spiritual bonds."

The origins of this quotation are unclear. It appears to have been circulating on Russian-language social media and web forums, with a few variations, since at least April 2017. A version was also used in Belarusian on a banner at a Belarusian anti-government picket in Gomel region in May 2022.

The user from whom Charov reposted the quotation – "Alexey Amosov", who lists his hometown as Leningrad – says in his profile that he "translates the news from Putinist TV channels into honest Russian language". Krasnogvardeysky District Court in St Petersburg convicted an Aleksey Aleksandrovich Amosov under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) on 17 May 2024 – it is unclear whether this is the same person, or what exactly gave rise to the prosecution.

"Not subject to disclosure"

Forum 18 asked Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee and the press service of the Federal Investigative Committee in Moscow why reposting a quotation is considered "discreditation" of the state bodies of the Russian Federation, when the quotation does not mention Russia or any specific state institution, and Charov did not add any comment.

Forum 18 put the same question to the Krasnoufimsk Inter-District Prosecutor's Office, also asking what punishment prosecutors would be seeking.

Aleksandr Shulga, head of Sverdlovsk Region Investigative Committee press service, responded on 29 July, stating only that "at present any information, in one way or another concerning the circumstances of [your] message, in accordance with the position of the investigation is not subject to disclosure".

In his response of 5 August, Krasnoufimsk's Acting Inter-District Prosecutor Ilya Kashin, told Forum 18 that prosecutor's offices "do not provide information on the interpretation of a legal norm, an explanation of its application, development of a legal position upon request, [or analysis] that is not directly related to the protection of the rights of the information user who submitted the request".

Kashin added that prosecutor's offices are not responsible for the investigation of criminal cases. "Preliminary investigation data may be disclosed only with the permission of the investigator." He directed Forum 18 to contact the "preliminary investigative body [ie. the Investigative Committee]".

Forum 18 had received no reply from the Federal Investigative Committee by the end of the working day in Moscow of 8 August.

"Would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine?"

Eduard Charov was first convicted of "discreditation" on 18 April 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2835](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2835)). Krasnoufimsk District Court fined him 45,000 Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.3.3, Part 1 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)), as well as 20,000 Roubles under Administrative Code Article 20.3.1 ("Incitement of hatred or enmity"). Sverdlovsk Regional Court upheld these fines on 24 May and 8 June 2023.

The combined fines represented five months' pension for Charov.

The first-instance court verdicts, seen by Forum 18, state that he made multiple posts on his VKontakte page from May 2022 onwards, "attributing purposefully hostile, violent, discriminatory actions of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation against civilians or socially significant objects [and] attributing the commission of war crimes to Russian military personnel on the territory of Ukraine".

Charov deleted the posts in question before his court appearance. After the "partial mobilisation" was announced in September 2022, Charov wrote "You churchmen/church people! Come to your senses! Understand! Think about it, would Jesus Christ have gone to kill in Ukraine????!" [punctuation original], according to the Christians Against War Telegram channel.

In another now-deleted post, Charov apparently also called President Vladimir Putin the Antichrist, according to independent Russian media outlet Mediazona (<https://zona.media/news/2024/06/29/charov>). He also offered sanctuary at the shelter to any reservists fleeing call-up to the army.

"For me, [the fines were] a huge amount, my [monthly] pension is 12,700 roubles," Charov told the independent Russian media outlet Takiye Dela on 3 April 2024 (<https://takiedela.ru/2024/04/ya-i-v-tyurme-prodolzhu-pomogat-lyudyam/>). "I thought I wouldn't be able to pay the fines. But it turned out that many people supported me. Strangers called and asked how they could help the shelter or pay the fines." People donated enough money to pay the fines and finish building a playground in the village.

Greater attention from the authorities

As time went on, however, Charov's opposition to the war led to greater isolation, and volunteers who used to help at the shelter stopped coming. They consider him "a dissident, a fascist, and a 'fifth columnist' all at once", Charov told Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan (<https://novyagazeta.eu/articles/2024/03/27/ia-ne-boius-tiurny-no-kto-pozabotitsia-o-kalekakh-i-bezdomnykh>) before his criminal prosecutions began. In Savinovo, he said, "no one supports the current regime, but they are afraid to talk about it openly".

Charov has also been subject to greater attention from the authorities, with warnings from the land use inspectorate and the fire service, and a summons from bailiffs who suspected him of "providing social services and not paying taxes on this activity", Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan reported on 27 March 2024.

On 21 February, the Krasnoufimsk Investigative Department drew up four more reports on "discreditation" offences and another on living without registration, Inna Charova noted on VKontakte. On the same day, the Federal Migration Service issued Charov with a 2,000 Rouble fine under Administrative Code Article 19.15.1, Part 1 ("Residence of a citizen of the Russian Federation .. in a residential premises without registration"). He challenged the fine unsuccessfully at Krasnoufimsk District Court on 26 March, according to the court website.

Charov explained to Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan that he had de-registered himself from his address and registered the house in his wife's name in an attempt to avoid pressure from officials.

Charov founded the shelter about ten years ago and, according to federal tax records, registered it as a non-profit organisation called "For the Sake of Christ" in 2017. He decided to liquidate the legal entity in 2021, believing that "You have to pay too much to the state for the right to help your neighbour". Thereafter, he and his wife have taken in poor and homeless people as guests in their home, he told Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan.

"Justification of terrorism"?

In early February 2024, Eduard Charov was also charged under Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 ("Public calls to commit terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism or propaganda of terrorism .. committed using mass media or electronic or information and telecommunications networks, including the Internet").

His wife Inna told the It's My City local news outlet

(<https://itsmycity.ru/2024-02-15/propovednika-izsverdlovskoj-oblasti-obvinili-vopravdanii-terrorizma>) that the basis for the criminal case was a "satirical comment" made in August 2023 on another user's VKontakte post about an act of arson at a military recruitment and enlistment office: "Award the Order of Courage posthumously with confiscation of property".

(The incident in question took place in Polevskoy, a small town in Sverdlovsk Region, when a man threw a Molotov cocktail at the door of the building on the evening of 11 August 2023. No one was hurt. A security guard soon put out the fire and traffic police detained the perpetrator nearby, the E1.ru local news website reported (<https://www.e1.ru/text/incidents/2023/08/14/72595463/>).)

Possible punishments for conviction under Criminal Code Article 205.2, Part 2 include a fine of 300,000 to 1 million Roubles or 5 to 7 years' imprisonment plus deprivation of the right to hold certain positions or engage in certain activities for up to 5 years.

The Investigative Committee has placed Charov under specific restrictions, including a ban on using the phone and internet and a ban on leaving his home district without permission. From 14 February 2024, Inna Charova has administered his VKontakte account. On that day, she noted that investigators had taken Eduard to Yekaterinburg for a forensic psychiatric examination (which concluded that he had no psychiatric problems). His health subsequently worsened and he was hospitalised on 28 February: "After stress, his hands go numb and his legs become worse", Inna explained.

(Charov has had health problems since suffering from hepatitis, blood poisoning, and temporary paralysis in the year 2000, he told Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan

(<https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/03/27/ia-ne-boius-tiurmy-no-kto-pozabotitsia-o-kalekakh-i-bezdomnykh>), and has received a disability pension for nearly two decades.)

The Investigative Committee suspended its investigation of the case while Charov was in hospital, but on 13 May 2024 had his name added to the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) "List of Terrorists and Extremists" ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)). This obliges banks to freeze an individual's assets (although small transactions are permitted).

Both Eduard and Inna appear to believe that he will go to prison. On 3 July, Inna appealed to supporters on VKontakte "to help get my husband ready for the colony" with clothes, toiletries, and tea.

"Most likely, it will all end with a prison term for me", Eduard told Takiye Dela on 3 April

(<https://takiedela.ru/2024/04/ya-i-v-tyurme-prodolzhu-pomogat-lyudyam/>), before the initiation of the second criminal case. "I already have a suitcase packed at home .. My wife will look after the shelter in the meantime. And I will continue to help people in prison. There are people in need everywhere."

Charov was baptised into the Russian Orthodox Church, briefly studied at an Orthodox seminary in his thirties, and later joined a Pentecostal church. He left the latter as he felt it did not help the needy effectively enough, and now considers himself "a Christian who does not belong to any of the official churches", as he explained to Takiye Dela.

Charov believes that the Russian Orthodox Church is "not God's, not a Christian church, it blesses killing" and "has become an appendage of state power". He nevertheless maintains good relations with the Moscow Patriarchate parish in Savinovo: "Sometimes [the priest] drops in to visit us. It is good that we came across a believing priest in Savinovo, you rarely meet such people", he commented to Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan.

On 16 February, Inna Charova posted on Eduard's VKontakte page a character reference which Fr Igor Savvateyev, priest of the Savinovo parish, had given to investigators. In it, Fr Igor emphasises the help that Charov has given to needy and marginalised people over many years, and states that "During conversations with Eduard, he has recommended himself as a sympathetic and caring person, ready to come to the aid of people who find themselves in difficult circumstances."

Anti-war priest released from prison

On 1 August 2024, Fr Ioann Kurmoyarov (of a branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia [ROCOR] not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate) was released from Correctional Colony No. 5 in St Petersburg, where he had been imprisoned from mid-March ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2904](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904)).

Fr Ioann is now subject to a 2-year ban on "engaging in activities related to posting publications on the Internet telecommunications network". He is not known to be under any other post-prison restrictions.

Fr Ioann (born Dmitry Valeryevich Kurmoyarov, 8 January 1968) was the second person to be imprisoned ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2857](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2857)) for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine from a religious perspective.

In multiple videos on his YouTube channel, he had accused the Russian army of committing crimes in Ukraine and criticised the "demonic spirituality" of the Moscow Patriarchate in its support for the invasion. He stated "'Blessed are the peacemakers' — 'the peacemakers', do you understand the problem? And those who have unleashed aggression will not be in heaven."

Kalinin District Court in St Petersburg sentenced Fr Ioann on 31 August 2023 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2857](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2857)) to a term of 3 years' imprisonment under Criminal Code Article 207.3 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) ("Public dissemination, under the guise of credible statements, of knowingly false information on the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"), Part 2, Paragraphs G and D. These punish the public dissemination of "false information" about the Russian Armed Forces "for selfish motives" and "for reasons of political, ideological, racial, national or religious hatred or enmity, or for reasons of hatred or enmity towards any social group".

The latter accusation appeared to derive from Fr Ioann's pronouncement in the video entitled "Who will be in heaven, and who in hell?" that "Whoever wants to take revenge on Kyiv and Ukraine, convert to Islam. There is blood feud in Islam. So, whoever wants to go to heaven, convert to Islam". "I declare that I had no intention [of committing] and did not commit any acts aimed at offending Muslims and inciting inter-religious enmity", Fr Ioann wrote in an open letter published on the Free Ioann Kurmoyarov Telegram channel on 13 March 2023. "I have always treated Muslims with respect, and was therefore referring exclusively to the opinions of authoritative figures in the Islamic world."

The charge of "selfish motives" was based on the fact that it is possible to earn money from YouTube videos, and Fr Ioann had a bank card linked to his channel, the Telegram channel of local news site MR7.ru explained on 1 August (<https://t.me/MR7ru/24928>). MR7 noted, however, that Fr Ioann had not withdrawn any funds from his YouTube channel, and the criminal case did not mention any sums.

Investigative Committee officers arrested Fr Ioann on 7 June 2022 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2756](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2756)). He spent the entirety of the investigation and trial, and the time between his conviction and his unsuccessful appeal on 15 February 2024, in custody at St Petersburg's Kresty-2 prison – this counted against his sentence at a rate of one day in detention to a day and half in the prison colony.

Because Criminal Code Article 207.3, Part 2 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2897](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2897)) carries a maximum punishment of 10 years' imprisonment, it is considered a serious crime – Fr Ioann will therefore have an active criminal record (sудимост, the state of being a convicted person) for 8 years. This has a number of legal, social, and practical consequences ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2681](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2681)), including bars to working in certain occupations.

### Krasnodar Region church escapes demolition

The Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church in Slavyansk-na-Kubani, an Orthodox church not affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate, was threatened with demolition ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2911](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2911)) after its Archbishop, Viktor Pivovarov, was prosecuted for opposing Russia's war in Ukraine on religious grounds. On 18 June 2024, however, Slavyansk City Court refused to uphold the lawsuit lodged by the city administration, according to the decision seen by Forum 18. The administration had argued that the church building was an "unauthorised structure".

The administration does not appear to have submitted an appeal within the stipulated one-month period.

Despite this reprieve, the church community remains concerned. On 25 June, Archbishop Viktor's YouTube channel was taken down and his access to it blocked (although it did not appear to have been blocked by the state media regulator Roskomnadzor). It was reinstated the following day after the community submitted an appeal to Google, but the company did not explain why this had happened. (Google's press office did not respond to Forum 18's 26 June enquiry as to whether Russia had asked it to remove Archbishop Viktor's YouTube channel.)

On 28 June, an employee of the Slavyansk administration, who had appeared on its behalf during the court case, came and photographed the church from outside, a church member told Forum 18 from outside Russia.

On 30 October 2023, the Investigative Committee led a raid on the church, during which unidentified armed men physically assaulted, tortured, and detained ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2872](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2872)) 32-year-old Hieromonk Iona Sigida, the Archbishop's assistant. He was later charged with "disobeying a police officer", as well as "discrediting" the Armed Forces in an article on the church's website. (No one has been punished for Fr Iona's torture.)

On 8 April 2024, a court convicted Archbishop Viktor ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2904](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2904)) of repeatedly "discrediting" the Russian Armed Forces in his sermons and online writings, and fined him 150,000 Roubles.

Slavyansk Inter-District Investigative Department (a subdivision of the Krasnodar Region branch of the Investigative Committee) wrote to the Administration of Slavyansk Urban Settlement on 20 December 2023 about "elimination of causes and conditions conducive to the commission of crimes".

It pointed out that Archbishop Viktor had committed his alleged offences (some still under investigation at this point) "in a public place, namely, in the building of the Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church .. foreseeing the inevitability of socially dangerous consequences in the form of destabilisation of the socio-political situation, the exertion of influence on public opinion, the formation in society of a negative mood and disruption of trust in decisions taken by the Supreme Commander in Chief [and] state bodies of the Russian Federation", and that, rather than the "individual residential construction" the designated land use permits, "in actuality there is a church located on this land plot ... in which "church services take place".

After an inspection of the site, the city administration duly lodged a civil lawsuit on 18 April 2024 ([https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2911](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2911)), which requested that the court declare the church an "unauthorised structure" and oblige Archbishop Viktor to demolish it at his own expense.

Judge Natalya Kovalchuk concluded, however, that the three-year statute of limitations on such a lawsuit had in fact expired in 2009, because "Kraytekhninventratizatsiya", the state enterprise providing land and property management services in Krasnodar Region, had notified the city administration that the church was an "unauthorised structure" in June 2006. She therefore refused to uphold the demolition request.

Eighty-seven-year-old Viktor Pivovarov was ordained a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCORA), which opened parishes inside Russia in the early 1990s. In 2006 he became an Archbishop in the Russian [Rossiyskaya] Orthodox Church (RosPTs), which was founded after a series of splits within ROCORA. 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 ROCORA or the Moscow Patriarchate.

The Holy Intercession Tikhonite Church was built in the late 1990s, funded by donations from parishioners, and has been in continuous use since January 2000. (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](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](https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351))

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