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Pokemon Go Blogger Complains of Prison Death Threats

By Ed Crowther

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The blogger arrested for catching Pokemon in a Yekaterinburg cathedral has complained of death threats in pre-trial detention, the Znak news website reported Wednesday.

Ruslan Sokolovsky, 22, was charged with extremism and offending religious sensitivities last week after he posted a video online of himself playing Pokemon Go in the city's Church of All Saints.

In the video, he rejects warnings that using the popular app in church could lead to a prison sentence.

Dmitry Kalinin, a member of Russia's Social Monitoring Commission, told Znak that the prison's psychiatrist threatened to send Sokolovsky for "psychiatric testing, where they don't let any lawyers in."

The psychiatrist reportedly promised to hold Sokolovsky in a psychiatric unit for "one to two months" and suggested that other prisoners might be sent to physically attack him, according to Kalinin. She also insinuated that Russia could bring back the death penalty, using the phrase "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," Kalinin and Sokolovsky said.

"Ruslan understood this as intimidation and threats," said Kalinin.

Prison authorities have been informed of the complaints, and said that they would discuss the matter with the centre's leadership on Thursday, Znak reported.

Representatives of the diocese of Ekaterinburg held a press conference on Tuesday in which they called on the blogger to publicly admit his guilt and express remorse.

Sokolovsky was "stunned" the Church had called on him to confess before the trial and said he had no intention of doing so, Kalinin said.

The city's metropolitan, Kirill, Initially promised to press for Sokolovsky's release but later changed stance, saying that it wasn't worth "mistaking forgiveness with Stockholm syndrome."

Since being detained, Sokolovsky, who earlier this year launched a self-titled atheist magazine, has requested books by the philosopher Bertrand Russell, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and the physicists Richard Feynman and Stephen Hawking. Sokolovsky has also announced his intention to start writing a book of his own, Znak reported.

If found guilty, Sokolovsky could face between two and three years in prison. A police spokesman for the region told local reporters last month that he personally wanted to see the blogger imprisoned for at least five years to deter further "pokemonists" from such blasphemy.

Further charges could also be pressed against Sokolovsky after police found a "spy pen" in his home earlier this week. Authorities claim could be used to receive illegal information from abroad.

Amnesty International recently released a statement calling Sokolovsky's detention "an absurd attack on freedom of expression," and urged authorities to release him immediately.

Anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny posted a blog post on Wednesday, highlighting the 5,894 serious crimes committed in the Sverdlovsk region last year, and criticizing the large police resources committed to investigating the "crime of catching Pokemon." The case "confirms that our police are a bunch of wasters and freeloaders," he said.

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