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Russia Detains Ex-Priest Suspected of Encouraging Children to 'Die for Russia'

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Father Sergei Romanov was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church after he denied the coronavirus pandemic and captured a monastery. **Donat Sorokin / TASS**

Russian law enforcement officers have detained an excommunicated priest at the women's monastery he seized near the city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of encouraging minors to "die for Russia," the Kommersant business daily reported Tuesday.

Father Sergei Romanov has been charged with persuading minors to commit suicide, criminal charges that carry a maximum prison sentence of four years, his attorney Svetlana Gerasimova told Interfax. The case is likely linked to one of his YouTube sermons in which he asks whether his supporters are ready to die for Russia, Gerasimova said.

Dozens of security officers stormed the Sredneuralsk women's monastery at around 1 a.m. Tuesday to detain the former priest, who changed his secular name to Nikolai Romanov after Russia's last emperor.

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Video footage circulating online shows officers clashing with the former monk's supporters, mostly nuns. The local 66.ru news website reported that officers used force against the nuns, with some of them allegedly beaten with batons and one of them diagnosed with a hip fracture.

Gerasimova said she has been unable to contact her client while he is being questioned by investigators. She said Romanov has also been charged with violating the right to freedom of conscience and religion as well as arbitrariness.

The former priest publicly feuded with the Russian Orthodox Church this spring when he refused to follow coronavirus safety guidelines, telling his followers the conspiracy theory that the pandemic was manufactured to implant microchips into the population using vaccines.

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After the Church barred him from preaching, he captured the Sredneuralsk women's monastery by force, cast out its head abbess and continued to lead worship services there. Media reports have detailed physical and psychological abuse toward the dozens of children who live at the monastery.

In October, the Church's leader Patriarch Kirill excommunicated Romanov, but he has continued to preach to his followers since.

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