

How Pokemon Go Led a Russian Blogger to Prison

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JamesGhost / YouTube

Russian prosecutors demanded a prison sentence of three years and six months on April 28 for blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky who uploaded a video of himself playing Pokemon Go in a church in Yekaterinburg last summer.

Ahead of the verdict which is due to be delivered on May 11, The Moscow Times explains details of this unusual case and some of the most notable testimonies given in court, first reported by the [Mediazona](#) website.

What are the charges?

Attention has focused on a video uploaded to YouTube in August, in which the 22-year-old Sokolovsky filmed himself playing the Pokemon Go virtual reality game on his iPhone in the Church of All Saints in Yekaterinburg. The church was built on the spot where Tsar Nicholas II and his family were believed to have been killed by the Bolsheviks.

In a short speech at the beginning of the video, the 22-year-old Sokolovsky dismisses media reports that playing Pokemon Go in churches could result in a prison sentence.

“This is complete nonsense,” Sokolovsky says in the video, right before entering the church. “Who could get offended if you’re just walking around with your smartphone in a church?”

But several weeks later, on Sept. 2, Sokolovsky was detained on charges of extremism and insulting the feelings of believers.

Prosecutors claim to have found “elements of incitement of hatred” in nine videos uploaded by Sokolovsky to YouTube and his so-called “atheist” video blog, between May 2013 and September 2016.

He has been slapped with nine instances of inciting hatred and seven instances of breaching the right to freedom of religion. A separate charge of using special equipment to illegally obtain information was added to the list after police found a ballpoint pen with a hidden camera during a search of his home.

The maximum sentence for insulting the rights of religious believers carries a sentence of up to seven years. But prosecutors have asked for 3 years and six months, Sokolovsky's lawyer announced on Facebook on Apr. 28.

How has the case progressed?

After his detention in early September, Sokolovsky was placed under house arrest. But on Oct. 28 last year, a court ruled to return him to prison after he was accused of violating the rules of house arrest when his girlfriend came to visit him to wish him a happy birthday.

Sokolovsky argued he opened his door because he was expecting a visit from his lawyers. In February, he was allowed to return home again where he has been ordered to remain until August this year.

Case hearings began on March 13. Sokolovsky has denied all the charges. He claimed the pen was bought online by an acquaintance.

Although he is accused of insulting the feelings of believers in the Yekaterinburg church, Sokolovsky claims he only walked around with his phone.

“Someone felt insulted when they watched my videos online,” he [told](#) reporters after the first March 13 hearing. “I never asked these people to watch my videos. Don't watch them, I don't recommend them to anyone!”

Liberal media and commentators — as well as the city's mayor Yevgeny Roizman — have jumped to Sokolovsky's defense. The mayor even testified on his behalf in court, but the court heard several witnesses claiming to have been insulted by the videos.

Yekaterinburg journalist Maxim Rummyantsev — who brought Sokolovsky's video to the attention of the authorities in the first place — told the court he'd been particularly hurt by the blogger's reference to Jesus Christ as “a rare Pokemon.”

“The videos were very unpleasant,” he told the court. “To watch them more than once is unpleasant. It is destabilizing to Russia.”

“You know, you can joke about your mother, your father, those who are close to you. You have the right. But for some reason, you joke about the belief of millions of people. That could be insulting not only to Russian Orthodox Christians but also to Catholics in Spain, Mexico. You know, Islamic State also commits beheadings — that's [their version] of a joke.”

During questioning, an employee of the church Andrei Shipintsev said the comparison of Jesus Christ to a Pokemon had made him “cry on the inside.”

“I wasn't perfect when I was 21, either,” he told the court. “But my mother taught me; the church is the church.”

“I want to help you. I don't want bad things for you,” he told Sokolovsky. “Since we, as a society made you this way, we should educate you. Let those men who you're locked up with, educate you. Most of them are Russian Orthodox,” he said.

“Thanks. They threatened to rape me,” replies Sokolovsky.

“There you go, they're re-educating you,” was the response.

'I Might Be an Idiot, But not an Extremist'

As a self-declared atheist, Sokolovsky has taken aim at many religions in his video blog posts.

In one, he laments the Muslim practice of slaughtering sheep during religious holidays.

Citing a recent case where several Muslims were deported from Russia, he adds: “I wish it were so more often!”

Prosecutors consider the video “an endorsement of the detention of Muslims during religious festivities and their future deportation.”

But Sokolovsky — who is the main caretaker for his disabled mother — has argued he didn't mean to do harm and should not be jailed for his ideological views.

“I'm an atheist, a cosmopolite, a libertarian and I've had these views for a very long time,” he [told](#) journalists after a final court hearing on Apr. 28.

“I'm not interested in religion because I think it's generally unnecessary [...] But the reason why I've pleaded innocence to these [extremism] charges is because I am in no case an extremist. I might be an idiot, but not an extremist.”

The court is expected to give a final verdict on May 11, Sokolovsky's lawyer has said. Amnesty International has labeled him a prisoner of conscience.

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