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RUSSIA: SCHOOLTEACHER FACES 10 YEARS IN PRISON FOR TELLING STUDENTS ABOUT A STRIKE ON A UKRAINIAN HOSPITAL

A schoolteacher of English from Penza (a city approximately 600 km south-east of Moscow), Irina Gen, has been charged with “disseminating false information” about the Russian Armed Forces, a crime punishable by up to 10 years’ imprisonment, after a pupil recorded comments she made about the war in Ukraine and reported her to the authorities.

On 18 March 2022, while answering a question from one of her year-eight pupils on why they can no longer attend competitions abroad, Irina Gen explained that Russia faced international isolation because of its invasion of Ukraine. Among other things, she mentioned that the Russian Armed Forces had attacked a maternity ward in the city of Mariupol in southern Ukraine.

A pupil secretly recorded the conversation and then reported it to the authorities. On 23 March, Irina Gen was summoned by the Federal Security Service (FSB) for questioning. An FSB officer told her that she had disseminated “fake news”, because Russia’s Ministry of Defense had denied that the Russian forces attacked the Mariupol hospital.¹

On 28 March, the Investigative Committee (a state agency responsible for investigating serious crimes) opened a criminal case against Irina Gen. She is accused of “public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of Russian Armed Forces to protect interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens, uphold international peace and security”, which she allegedly committed out of “persistent animosity towards the head of the state”.² If convicted, Irina Gen is facing up to 10 years’ imprisonment under the newly-introduced Article 207.3(2)(d) of the Criminal Code.

The Russian attack on the hospital in Mariupol on 9 March, resulting in several civilian casualties and numerous injuries, has been reported by several media³ and confirmed by local and national authorities in Ukraine, but denied by the Russian military. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov however also stated that the hospital had been attacked by Russian forces but claimed that it had been cleared of all patients and used by the Ukrainian forces.⁴

Since the beginning of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, the Russian authorities have engaged in misinformation and disinformation campaign, including by banning the term “war” (and insisting this was a “special military operation”) and introducing new legislation which effectively criminalized any reporting on the conflict which contradicts the officially sanctioned news.

The criminal case against Irina Gen is part of the Russian authorities’ campaign intended to silence domestic criticism of their aggression against Ukraine and intimidate those who criticize violations of international law committed by the Russian Armed Forces.

This prosecution violates the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and to receive and impart information, which are guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, European Convention on Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, to which Russia is a party, as well as the country’s own Constitution. Authorities should immediately terminate criminal proceedings against Irina Gen and drop charges against any person prosecuted for peacefully voicing their opinion on Russia’s war in Ukraine. The newly introduced Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code, which effectively criminalizes criticism of the Russian Armed Forces, must be repealed.

¹ Idel.Realii, “Интервью педагога из Пензы Ирины Ген, которую обвиняют в распространении «фейка» о Вооруженных силах за разговор с ученицей об Украине”, 5 April 2022, idelreal.org/a/31787223.html

² Criminal case documents, copy on file with Amnesty International.

³ AP News, “Airstrike hits Ukraine maternity hospital, 17 reported hurt”, 10 March 2022, apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-europe-2bed71c00916d44ea951c5809b446db3

⁴ BBC Russian Service, “Удар по детской больнице в Мариуполе, погибли три человека”, 10 March 2022, bbc.com/russian/news-60683076