



Illustration: OVD-Info

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ARTICLES

“Life feels surreal these days.” A woman fined for a cafe argument about Ukraine

On April 5, a Moscow resident, Irina (name changed at her request), was fined 30,000 rubles (US\$365) under an article about «discrediting» the Russian army. A week earlier, a protocol was drawn up against her after she had got into an argument in a coffee shop with a man who was disparaging Ukrainians. He recorded a part of the conversation on his phone, and then proceeded to call the police.

Текст на русском

It was Thursday. As usual, I went to my favourite coffee shop. One of the visitors very loudly talked about Ukrainians being «faggots» and how «they need to be driven out.» I made

a comment to him, asking why he called them «faggots», while so many of us have relatives and friends living in Ukraine. In addition, he was in public where such statements are inappropriate.

I feel very strongly about such phrases, because I have a classmate living in Ukraine, with whom we've always got along very well and are keeping in touch. On top of that, I have many more not as close acquaintances who live there. What is going on in Ukraine now is very terrifying and alarming.

The man wouldn't stop talking and started to provoke me, by saying that all Ukrainians are «faggots» and that «we will smash them all.» I asked: «Should we „smash“ everyone without exception?». The man answered affirmatively. «This is the truly correct Russian method that you are now proposing — to „denazify“ everyone, and then sort it out, » I said [sarcastically].

At this point, the man took out his phone and started filming me. Only the last phrase got on the record. I wanted to film him in response, but he told me that he works in law enforcement and it's not allowed to film him. He snatched my phone and grabbed my hand. He called the police afterwards.

The police arrived quickly — in about ten minutes. The man did not restrain me while we were waiting for them, but I did not plan to run away from him in any case, as he immediately threatened that he would wring my hands — this man was twice as big as me. I didn't want to take the risk.

When the police arrived, the man showed them the video straight away. Since the phrase was cut off, the policemen were not very interested in the recording. The police said that it was clearly taken out of context, and it was easy to understand from the video that this was a response to something. Nevertheless, they asked me to go to the police station with them.

I stayed there for at least two hours. The policemen were unusually normal. Didn't use force, didn't torment me with questions. Moreover, they even told me: «Talk about such topics in the kitchen. There is no need to discuss this in public now.»

At the police station the officers were going through my social media accounts — VKontakte and Instagram though they didn't read the private messages. They used my phone to access my page on VKontakte. I haven't really been using it for a while, so they haven't found anything of interest.

As we headed to the police station, so did the man I argued with at the coffee shop. He found my post about mobilization on Instagram. As I understand, it was the bartender who gave him my Instagram — we followed each other some time ago. The bartender and this man knew each other quite well too.

I posted about mobilization on Instagram in September 2022 asking «How could they be sending people with no training to become cannon fodder?».

This was the post that caught the eye of the police officers as they issued a citation for «discrediting the Russian army».

The whole situation feels surreal. I would have never believed it if somebody else told me about it. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. When you read snitching stories in the news, you never imagine it could be about you. Surely everybody I know is reasonable.

Of course, I'm not going to my favourite coffee shop anymore.

I told about what happened only my closest family. Of course, everyone was shocked. They compared what was happening now in Russia with the Soviet Union, where snitching had been rife.

I am glad about only one thing — my older family members do not support the «special military operation» anymore. The change is especially stark in men over 60. It is all well and good when you lie on your sofa watching on the news how the Russian army prepares to take Lviv. When your own family faces repressions, you have to face the reality.

I do not approve of violence myself. Violence only provokes and aggravates conflicts. It's the civilians who suffer the most from armed conflicts, not those who start them. I always believed that heads of state should prioritize their citizens and make every effort to resolve conflicts peacefully.

I have had questions for our government for a long time, ever since the Kursk submarine disaster. [The nuclear Kursk submarine sank due to the Navy's malpractices. The authorities inept response coupled with the poorly maintained equipment might have been the reason for the crew's death. After the incident the government did all it could to cover up the tragedy.] And the questions kept piling up.

I am in such a surreal state these days. I have to think twice about what I can and cannot say. As I am going through all of this, I cannot believe that it could possibly be real. I cannot wrap my head around it. You read about snitching when studying history. These reports have been coming back gradually into our lives, and now they are here in full bloom.

Sometimes I discuss all that's going on with my friend, and they would ask: «Could you have imagined a year and a half ago that this is what life in Russia would be like?».

Recorded by Karina Merkuryeva

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