

Russian Teacher Convicted for Writing Poem in Support of Ukraine

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A teacher of German in a provincial Russian town has been sentenced to 300 hours of community service and banned from teaching for two years for publishing a poem on the Internet condemning Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine, Radio Svoboda reported.

Alexander Byvshev, 42, published his poem in early March last year, shortly before Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Vigilant residents of his hometown in the Oryol region reportedly read the poem and complained to a local newspaper, which in turn informed the regional Prosecutor's Office, Radio Svoboda reported Monday on its website. As a result, the teacher was charged with “citing hatred or hostility” and his poem was declared extremist.

Byvshev's lawyer, Vladimir Suchkov, said he would appeal the sentence. He said the judge did not even read the poem before making the ruling, the Takiedela.ru news website reported Tuesday.

The teacher himself told Radio Svoboda that the verdict was politically motivated, and said he would continue to publish poems dedicated to the ongoing crisis in relations between Russia and Ukraine.

He also told reporters from the BBC Russian service that his friends and colleagues had turned against him after he was charged, going so far as to testify for the prosecution during the trial.

Relations between Russia and neighboring Ukraine soured after the latter's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was ousted by a popular uprising early last year. Relations have since plummeted further after Russia annexed Crimea and Ukraine accused Moscow of supporting separatists fighting a bloody war in eastern Ukraine — allegations that the Kremlin denies.

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