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Supreme Court Reduces Sentence of Russian Woman Pardoned for Treason

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Oksana Sevastidi leaves the Lefortovo prison in Moscow, March 12, 2017. **Denis Tyrin / AP**

Russia's Supreme Court has upheld a verdict of high treason against Oksana Sevastidi, a Russian woman jailed for seven years after sending two text messages to a friend living in Georgia.

Sevastidi, who received a pardon from Russian President Vladimir Putin last week, saw her sentence symbolically reduced to just three years imprisonment, but was not acquitted of the crime, her lawyer Ivan Pavlov told The Moscow Times.

Sevastidi was convicted for sending two text messages to a friend from Georgia about military equipment she had seen close to the Russian city of Sochi in April 2008. The security services claimed the Georgian was a spy, and Sevastidi was convicted to seven years' imprisonment in 2015.

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Treason

Pavlov said that although the Supreme Court did not exonerate Sevastidi, the ruling in itself was remarkable.

“First, three years for the charge of high treason is an all-time record. There aren’t any precedents of courts handing down such lenient sentences. Secondly, the court more than halved Sevastidi’s sentence — from seven years to three — which is also extremely rare. And thirdly, three years for treason is four times less than the minimum sentence for this offense, which is 12 years,” the lawyer told The Moscow Times.

With Russia’s international isolation deepening after the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the country’s authorities have declared information a new type of weapon — and have begun actively persecuting those who, in the state’s opinion, use it to help foreign countries harm Russia.

According to Supreme Court data, the number of high treason cases tripled in 2014: from 4 people in 2013, to 15 people 12 months later. Conviction rates have also risen: from six convictions in 2015, to 13 in the first half of 2016.

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