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Russian LGBT Activist Faces Porn Trial for Vagina Drawings

By Anna Malpas for AFP

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Artist and activist Yulia Tsvetkova. **Yulia Tsvetkova / VKontakte**

Yulia Tsvetkova posted delicate drawings and embroidered images of vulvas on a social media page called "Vagina Monologues" that she hoped would help lift the taboo on women's bodies.

Instead, the Russian artist and campaigner for women's and LGBT rights has been put under house arrest for the posts.

Since she was detained in November, the 26-year-old has been waiting to stand trial for distributing pornography online, a charge which carries a jail term of between two and six years. In Russia, distributing pornography is illegal and the law is regularly enforced.

She has a hearing on extending her house arrest on Monday.

Her case has prompted international attention, with Amnesty International last month

declaring her a prisoner of conscience facing "absurd charges."

She said that judgement was important to her, because many people had suggested it was her fault she was slapped with the "shameful" charge.

"It gives me confirmation that yes, my case is politically motivated," she said by phone from her home in the Far East city of Komsomolsk-on-Amur.

Tsvetkova believes the authorities are using the pornography charge as a pretext for cracking down on activists, particularly in the LGBT community, because it is easy to pin on people and carries a long sentence.

By comparison, Russia's legislation on gay propaganda to minors, which has been used to prevent numerous gay pride events, carries a maximum sentence of 15 days in police cells.

Although Russia decriminalised homosexuality in 1993, homophobia remains widely socially acceptable.

Recent constitutional amendments proposed by President Vladimir Putin and backed by parliament include a clause that marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

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Another LGBT activist in the nearby city of Khabarovsk, Sergei Arnautov, has been arrested on the same pornography charge for allegedly posting gay porn videos on a social media account, according to Russian television.

"It's possible that there is a new method in the Far East — if they can 'close' a case with this charge, they will try in other cities," Tsvetkova says.

Her lawyer Yakov Pushkaryov said he had often defended people charged with pornography but this was the first time the defendant was an activist.

He said he couldn't comment on the likelihood of Tsvetkova being convicted but said "we are doing all we can to prevent this."

The charge has also been used against a transgender woman called Michelle in the western Bryansk region who was sentenced to three years over posts of drawings allegedly showing naked minors. The courts threw out the verdict and ordered a retrial.

For Tsvetkova, the pornography charge is a major escalation after she was twice prosecuted for "propaganda" of gay values to minors.

The first charge came over a children's show she directed called "Blue and Pink," which criticised gender stereotypes, and the second was for a social media post of a drawing of same-sex couples with children.

Tsvetkova says she is one of just a handful of activists in her city, which is best known for producing military aircraft.

She previously hosted readings, lectures and a children's theatre at a community centre which she eventually closed under pressure last year.

She also kept a feminist blog and worked on sex education for children, offered support for LGBT teenagers and held showings for a LGBT film festival.

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The "Vagina" page, marked as suitable for people over 18, was something she spent little time on but did for six months as a "hobby," she says.

She says she has received death threats from a shadowy homophobic group called Saw because of the page, and a vociferous anti-LGBT campaigner, Timur Bulatov, boasts online that he reported her to police.

Tsvetkova's case has angered many Russians and at a protest on International Women's Day in a Moscow park, young women held home-made placards with slogans in support of her including "We are all Tsvetkovas" and "In my country there shouldn't be criminal cases over drawings of vaginas."

"My vagina isn't pornography" read a placard held by Nadezhda Aronchik, a 26-year-old activist.

"It's clear that the case is fabricated," she said. "They are prosecuting her for her pictures that absolutely aren't pornography."

Tsvetkova faces an extension to her house arrest later this month and it is unclear when her trial will begin.

She says she is trying to keep her spirits up, despite being unable to visit a dentist to get treatment for a severe toothache.

"Looking at the statistics on guilty verdicts in Russia, I have very few chances," Tsvetkova says. "I'm not under any illusions."

But, she says, "I can't sit every day crying about my future. I'm trying to believe in a miracle."

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