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Russian Journalist Jailed for Social Media Post on Mariupol Theatre Strike

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Maria Ponomarenko. **Evgeny Pavlenko / Kommersant**

A Russian journalist and activist has been jailed ahead of her trial on accusations of spreading "fake" news about the war in Ukraine in a social media post, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported Wednesday.

Maria Ponomarenko, a journalist for the RusNews outlet, was charged over a March 17 Telegram post that said Russian forces bombed the Mariupol drama theatre in southern Ukraine where hundreds of civilians had been sheltering. The Russian Defense Ministry has denied that its forces were behind the Mariupol drama theatre strike, saying Ukrainian "nationalists" bombed the building.

St. Petersburg's Oktyabrsky District Court ordered to place Ponomarenko, 44, in pre-trial detention until June 22, RIA Novosti reported.

If found guilty, she faces up to 10 years in prison.

Ponomarenko's lawyer Sergei Podolsky said there is no evidence that his client wrote the Telegram post, as it was posted by an opposition Telegram channel.

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The local Bumaga news website reported that the Telegram post was viewed 292 times and contained phrases including "it is impossible to remain silent, knowing about the death of thousands of innocent people" and "sane people are for peace."

Speaking to Bumaga earlier this week, Ponomarenko said she believed the criminal case is in retaliation for her social activism.

Ponomarenko's teenage children were questioned by police, Sota reported, with her 16-year-old daughter allegedly testifying against her mother. Ponomarenko's lawyer Podolsky denied this, however.

President Vladimir Putin signed the law against spreading "fake news" about the military shortly after sending troops into Ukraine.

Under the law, sharing non-Kremlin-approved information about the war — which Moscow calls a "special military operation" — can be punished by 10 to 15 years in prison.

Earlier this month, St. Petersburg artist Alexandra Skochilenko was charged under the same law on suspicion of replacing grocery store price tags with information about the March 16 Mariupol drama theater air strike.

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