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Russia Jails Buryat Activist 7 Years in Absentia for 'War Fakes'

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Alexandra Garmazhapova. **Alexandra Garmazhapova / facebook**

A court in the Siberian republic of Buryatia on Friday sentenced the head of the anti-war advocacy group Free Buryatia Foundation to seven years of prison in absentia for spreading "war fakes."

Russian authorities accused activist Alexandra Garmazhapova of spreading "knowingly false information" about the Russian Armed Forces in a video about Russian servicemen who were detained in eastern Ukraine's Luhansk region last year after refusing to continue fighting in the war.

"I don't consider this [ruling] a legal document that can be taken seriously — that's my principled position," Garmazhapova, who currently resides outside Russia, told The Moscow Times.

"We were dealing with a fake legislation and a fake court, so the result is a fake verdict," she added.

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Prosecutors argued that Garmazhapova's actions were "motivated by political hatred."

However, an independent analysis of the video, which was published on Free Buryatia's YouTube channel, found no signs of "humiliation of the dignity of a person or a group of people based on ethnic or political affiliation," according to a court document the activist shared with The Moscow Times.

Garmazhapova, who was also branded a "foreign agent" by Russian authorities, is the first ethnic anti-war activist and member of an indigenous anti-war movement to be convicted in absentia.

The Free Buryatia Foundation was created in March 2022 and focuses on the rights of mobilized Buryats — an ethnic minority in Siberia — and provides them with legal advice.

In September, Russia designated Free Buryatia as an "undesirable organization," a label that criminalizes the group and puts its staff at risk of prosecution.

"I think [Russian officials] made a certain contribution to making [Free Buryatia] more visible and recognizable, so the entire world would know that Buryats are against this war," Garmazhapova said.

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