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‘I Just Wanted to Stop the War’: Russian Artist Sentenced to 7 Years for Price Tag Protest

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Alexandra Skochilenko. **Olga Maltseva / AFP**

When Alexandra Skochilenko swapped price tags at a St. Petersburg supermarket with statements criticizing Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and highlighting civilian deaths in the conflict, she didn’t expect that it could lead to her imprisonment.

“Back then, it seemed safe,” Skochilenko's girlfriend Sofia Subbotina told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

“But these past one and a half years have shown us that nothing in Russia is secure.”

A court in St. Petersburg on Thursday sentenced the 33-year-old artist and musician to seven years in prison on charges of spreading “fake news” about the Russian Armed Forces.

“Despite being behind bars, I am freer than you. I can make my own decisions and speak my mind,” Skochilenko said during her last word in court.

Skochilenko's trial has been one of the longest prosecutions carried out under the "military fakes" law, which was passed shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

She was accused of replacing six price tags with similar tags that had information about the war, including details about the presence of Russian conscripts in Ukraine — something that President Vladimir Putin denied at the start of the invasion — and facts about civilian deaths in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

Skochilenko was denounced by an elderly woman who saw her replacing the price tags and was "outraged by the slander" and "very worried about Russian soldiers in Ukraine."

In a recent interview with the Bumaga media outlet, the woman said she didn't "sympathize with her" and believed that Skochilenko "hoped that she would get off easy and at the same time become a hero."

Skochilenko, however, said she was driven by the idea of saving people's lives.

"I just wanted to stop the war — that was my motivation. Not hatred, but compassion. I am sure that everyone in the [court] room does not want there to be a war," Skochilenko said during a court hearing this month.

"I am deeply convinced that life is a great miracle," she said.

Since her arrest in April 2022, Skochilenko has spent 19 months in detention, enduring poor conditions and a lack of medical treatment that her lawyer Yana Nepovinnova describes as "torture."

Skochilenko has been kept in pre-trial detention despite dealing with several health issues such as celiac disease, which requires a strict diet, and a congenital heart defect.

Her requests to be placed under house arrest due to her health conditions were rejected by the court.

Skochilenko's health has markedly worsened in jail, her mother Nadezhda Skochilenko told The Moscow Times.

"In ordinary life, she follows a specific routine to maintain her health, but in prison, it is very difficult. Her health is deteriorating before our eyes," Nadezhda Skochilenko said.

Skochilenko is not the only person to be charged with spreading "fake news" about the military after replacing price tags with anti-war information. Her defense argued that in a similar case, a resident of the city of Izhevsk was merely fined.

The artist and her defense also raised concerns about Skochilenko's well-being due to her court hearing schedule. Because of the tight timing, she was unable to eat properly, take her needed medication doses, and replace the batteries in her heart monitor, and wasn't always allowed to have court breaks to drink water or go to the toilet. In one instance, an ambulance had to be called to court when Skochilenko was feeling unwell.

Her mental health also appears to be deteriorating.

“Sasha has been grappling with her depression, even making it challenging for her to write letters,” Nadezhda Skochilenko said, using Alexandra’s diminutive name. “She now rarely communicates with me, expressing that she lacks the strength, often spending most of her time lying down to regain energy.”

An artist and musician, Skochilenko published comic books about mental health before her arrest. She also worked as a freelance journalist, covering political protests for the St. Petersburg media outlet Bumaga, and was involved in feminist activities.

"It just so happened that I represent everything that the Putin regime is so intolerant of: creativity, pacifism, LGBT, psycho-enlightenment, feminism, humanism, and love for everything bright, ambiguous, unusual,” Skochilenko said in an open letter shortly after the arrest.

According to Skochilenko, prison officials were initially reluctant to adjust her prison diet to accommodate the health restrictions she has due to gluten intolerance.

“I have constant stomach pain and sometimes I start vomiting when I am eating,” she said in an interview with the U.S.-funded RFE/RL news outlet last year.

"The most critical issue, perhaps, is my vital need for gluten-free food. Currently, among penitentiary institutions, it is only available in pre-trial detention center No. 5. Your Honor, if you were to send me to a colony, it would lead to my starvation,” Skochilenko said this week.

She also complained about living in a cell with another inmate who “forced” her to clean the cell and “the toilet with a sponge instead of a brush.”

Subbotina said she usually visited Skochilenko at her pre-trial detention center twice a month for one hour and can also make calls every week.

“This is very little, but it already feels like a pretty good option," she said.

Yet Skochilenko could often be seen smiling during court hearings, with her mother and girlfriend saying that the worldwide support she receives helps her to stay strong. After Thursday's verdict, she was seen forming a heart with her hands and blowing kisses to journalists and people who came to support her.

Several Russian artists and public figures have voiced their support for Skochilenko and called for her release. Feminist activist group Pussy Riot also held a protest this month in support of the artist. The BBC included Skochilenko in the list of BBC's 100 Women of 2022.

Skochilenko’s family and friends said that the artist still has no regrets about her protest.

“She doesn’t regret anything. It was important for Sasha to say what she said,” Subbotina told The Moscow Times.

This was also echoed by Skochilenko’s mother.

“I’m proud of my daughter,” Nadezhda Skochilenko told The Moscow Times, adding that she supported her decision even despite the harsh prison sentence.

“I am very afraid of the punishments that will follow. I'm scared and try not to think about it,” she said.

“However, I can't say that it would be better if she didn't do this.”

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