



Illustrations: Olya Terekhova for OVD-Info

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СВОЙ ОПЫТ

## **Saint Javelina: How a fifth-grader and her mother were detained for a Ukrainian flag profile picture**

On October 5 in Nekrasovka district of Moscow, police took Varya, a fifth-grader, to a police station. Her mother Yelena was also brought there with her. The reason for the detention of the girl was a letter from the school principal, who complained about the girl's profile picture featuring a Ukrainian flag on a social network, as well as her skipping propaganda lessons. We publish the mother's story about what happened.

*Текст на русском*

It all started on the morning of October 5 with a call from my youngest daughter Sonia, who is now in third grade. I picked up the phone, but instead of my daughter's voice I heard the voice of a woman I didn't know. She introduced herself as a police officer and explained that she was calling me because my eldest daughter, fifth-grader Varya, was being taken to a police station and I had to get there.

At first I didn't understand what was happening. My first thought was that my youngest daughter must have been kidnapped. I asked the woman to let me talk to the child so I could make sure she was okay. In response, the caller started to get indignant: «Do you think I'm pranking you, I introduced myself!»

I asked how I was supposed to get immediately to the station where they were planning to take my daughter. I could be at work or just on the other side of Moscow. Then the policewoman said: «We can only keep your daughter at the police station for three hours. Then we'll take her to an office for juvenile affairs» and began to describe to me in vivid detail what awaited Varya there.

After the conversation, I hung up the phone and called my youngest daughter's homeroom teacher. I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that this was all true. I wanted to make sure that Sonia was all right. When I asked her to put her on the phone, the teacher answered rather sharply, «She's fine, calm down.»

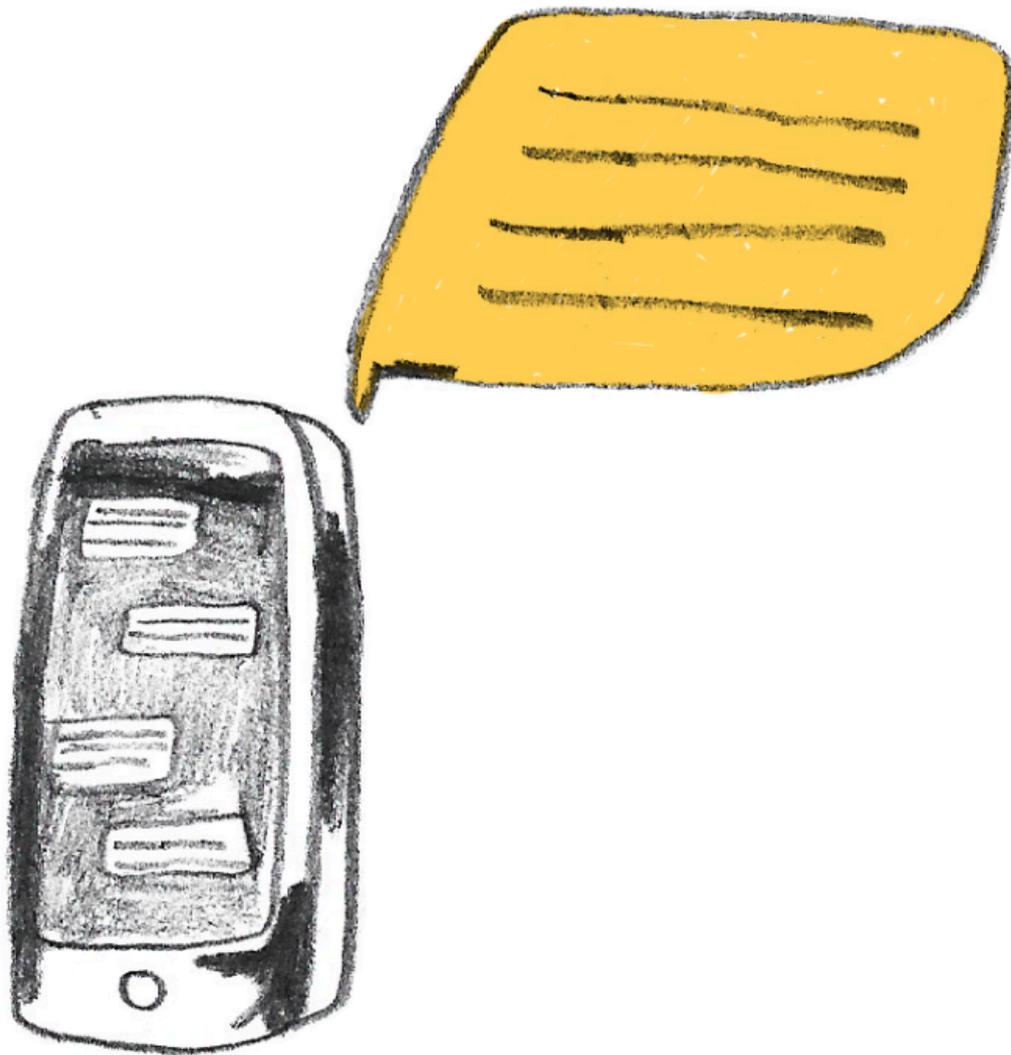
Then I packed up and went to the Nekrasovka police station. On the way I called the OVD-Info number, my hands shaking. The lawyer said that the most important thing now was to get my daughter back, and that we would be appealing everything later. But on my way there I got another call from the school and was asked to go there: Varya was still there.

At school the social pedagogue took me to a small room where the police officer who called me earlier, a man in civilian

clothing, and another social pedagogue were already waiting. The three of them surrounded me and began to describe my further fate: Varya would be taken to the police station, together with me, and the police would draw up reports on us.

The police officer identified herself by giving her name and surname, the social pedagogue said we knew each other already, having met at school, and the man in civilian clothing refused to introduce himself, saying only that he was from the FSB and «that's enough.»

Then they told me that a complaint had been filed against Varya — my daughter had allegedly written something wrong in her classmates' chat room. After that the police officer came up to me with her phone. There was, as I understand it, a screenshot of Varya's message. I was not allowed to see it, because as soon as I took the phone, the policewoman snatched it away, saying, «Why were you trying to steal my phone?» I was shocked.



I found out that one of the parents had filed a complaint against Varya two days before that. The homeroom teacher called me and said that the vice-principal wanted to talk to me. The latter told me that Varya had allegedly written something wrong in the chat room. However, no quotes were provided. I replied that I knew nothing about this situation and in general I do not believe that my daughter could write anything bad, but I would definitely check the chat room and talk to my child.

I asked Varya what kind of message upset one of the parents so much, and asked her to show me the chat room. My daughter showed me the phone, but explained that the message that had prompted complaints was no longer there, because all the content was deleted automatically at 12:00 a.m. Those were the settings they had there.

My daughter told me that recently one of her classmates started talking about politics in the chat room: he wrote that [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy was a clown. Varya started to defend him. According to the vice-principal, the complaint was filed by one of the parents of the children who were in that chat room.

I had been feeling that we were being monitored closely since the beginning of the school year, so I didn't react to the situation in any special way. The thing is, I had already been called to the school because the children did not attend the «Important Conversations», and then because Varya had a picture of the Ukrainian flag as her profile picture. But my daughters didn't attend the «Important Conversations» only because first they were sick, and then they were busy doing something. Since my kids do well in school, I let them skip classes from time to time — we would go to music school or shoot commercials. In total, Varya «skipped» more math lessons than «Important Conversations».

There was a very interesting story with that profile picture. For a long time Varya had a picture of Saint Javelina as her profile picture. It is a doll with a halo, reminiscent of the iconographic image of the Virgin Mary, with a big gun. Behind her is a Ukrainian flag. I didn't think any questions about the picture could arise, because that was the profile picture that Varya had for a very long time. Even her grandparents, who don't share my anti-war views, saw it and never said anything.

When I received a complaint about the profile picture from the teachers, I asked them to explain to me what exactly it was that they didn't like about it. Because I didn't know how to explain to a 10-year-old child that the blue and yellow colors are now forbidden in Russia.



Mural "Saint Javelina" in Kyiv, May 2022 / Author photo: Rasal Hague, mural by Chris Shaw, CC BY 3.0

After the policewoman told us why they wanted to send Varya to the station, we went towards the exit, where I finally saw my daughter. Two policemen were already waiting for us outside. They explained to me that Varya had to go to the police station with them, and that I could get there in my car. When my daughter heard this, she started crying, screaming, «Mom», and losing her temper. I asked them not to take her away and let us go to the police station on our own. The

policewoman didn't allow it, Varya kept screaming, but they wouldn't let me near her.

This went on for a few minutes, and then the policewoman said something to her colleagues, and, as if on cue, they grabbed me under the arms and dragged me to their car. I tried to break free in the other direction toward my daughter, but they only twisted my arms harder. I asked on what grounds they are doing this to me. They wouldn't answer, they just giggled. They acted as if they were entitled to anything.

Meanwhile, the policewoman grabbed Varya and took her to the car as well. Thank God, we ended up in the same car, and I was able to calm my daughter down at least a little bit.

At the station the policewoman handed me a letter from the school principal, who was the one who had contacted the police. The letter said that Varya was not attending the «Important Conversations», that she had a strange profile picture, and that she had written something wrong in the chat room. At the same time, the principal noted that Varya was a good girl in general and an excellent student. As I understand it, she asked the police to find the causality in Varya's behavior and to sort things out with her parents.

I was asked to write an explanatory note. Varya was questioned by the policewoman and her answers were transferred to a document on her computer. My daughter is sometimes shy around strangers. And now, someone asks her something, and she hesitates and looks at me.

I understand that she just didn't know what to answer, because the questions she was asked were about politics, clearly not intended for a 10-year-old child. Eventually, Varya did not even answer many of them. The policewoman put it in the report as follows: «The child is silent, looks at her mother, afraid to express her opinion in front of her.»

Then we were questioned by the officers from the Center for Countering Extremism. From their conversations I understood that they were planning to draw up a report on me for discrediting the Russian army (Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses — *OVD-Info*). They asked me questions about my views on politics and what rallies I took part in. I answered that I was a housewife and was interested in nothing of that kind. They kept pressuring me.

Varya was mostly questioned about her profile picture: why she chose it and whether she knew what it meant. Varya answered that she simply liked the picture — she found it on the Internet, so she put it up as her profile picture. Then the police officers noticed that the image had an inscription that said «Glory to Ukraine» in Ukrainian. I hadn't even noticed it before, because the inscription is really very small.

They ask Varya, «Did you even see what it says?» She answers: «No. It says something in a foreign language, and I don't know any language other than Russian.»



After a while I noticed that there were also representatives of the guardianship authorities and the Harmony Family Center present in the office — at least that was how they were introduced to me. I was terribly frightened. The police kept pressuring me, saying that they could put me in the jail cell at the station any minute. Judging by the way they had behaved before, I could see that it was quite possible. At home I have another daughter, who is a third-grader, and I'm bringing them up on my own. My husband, who is not the

children's father, is not a Russian citizen, and since February he hasn't been able to come visit us.

After I wrote the explanatory note, the police officers said that we would all go to our apartment together. I asked to see the documents that provided the grounds for me to let them into my apartment. No-one showed me anything.

Eventually, three employees of the guardianship authorities, a woman from the Harmony Family Center, a policewoman, and two officers of the Center for Countering Extremism came to our apartment. They spent a long time in the apartment trying to find Varya's phone. The thing is, after this whole chat room thing started, I took her cell phone away from her and put her SIM card in my phone. And so they call her number — my cell phone rings. They call mine — the same phone rings again. My phone can hold two SIM-cards, it took them a long time to figure out what was going on.

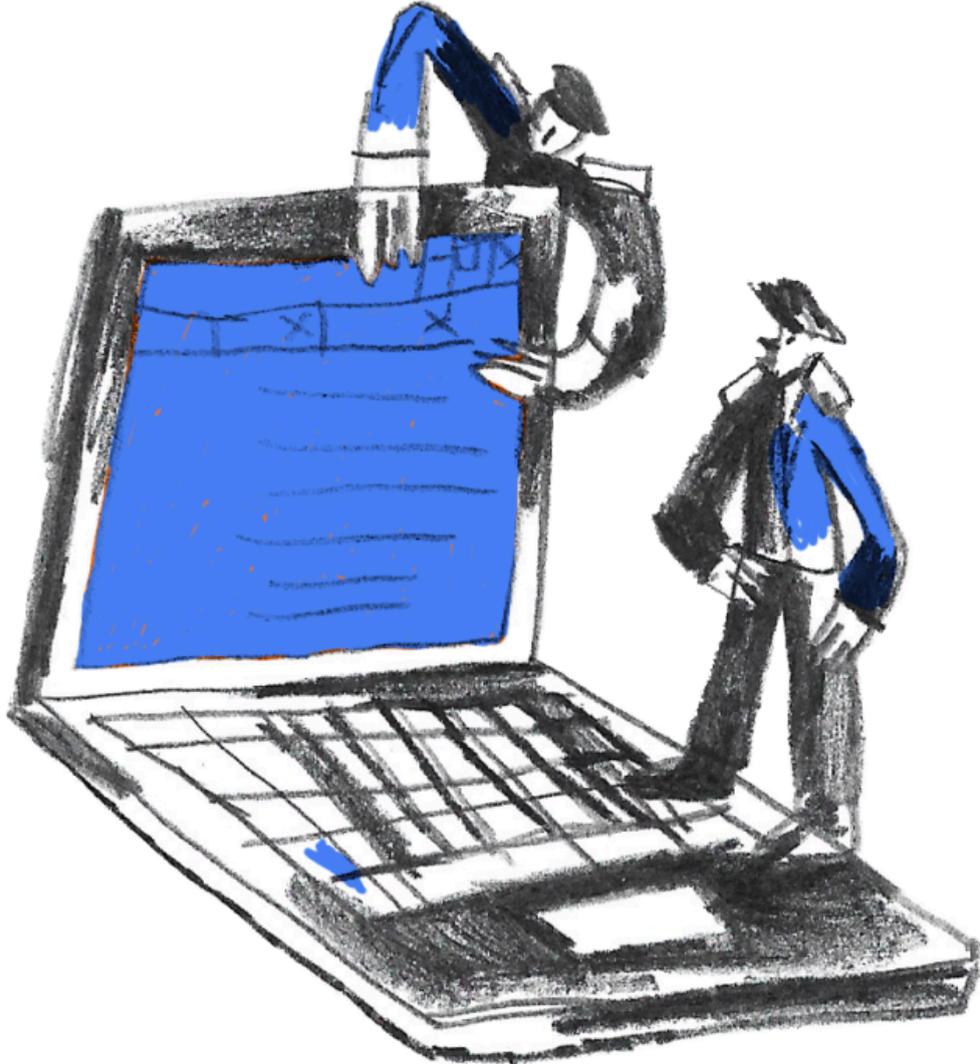
When they did figure it out, they literally snatched my phone out of my hands: they started reading all my correspondence in messengers. On the way, I texted my youngest daughter that we were about to come home with the police and asked her to clean up and put my laptop away. She hid it inside of the couch. The cops saw this message, found the computer and started to examine it closely, too. The browser was open, so they scrolled through all of the tabs and took some pictures.

Then they started to inspect the room. They looked everywhere, and if they saw something yellow and blue, they took pictures. From the conversations between the cops, I understood that they were trying to dig up some material so that they could pin «discrediting the Russian army» on me.

The women from the guardianship authorities and the Harmony Center were constantly writing things down in their notebooks, asking to see the children's documents: birth

certificates, registration, asking who else lived in the apartment with us.

In the end, the cops said they were done for the day, but they would look into all of my social media and come back again.



It took me a few days to recover from everything that had happened to us. At first it seemed as if it was a dream and nothing terrible really happened. Then I gradually began to get my head straight. The first night I felt terribly disgusted: I tried to clean everything the police had touched in the apartment, I wiped all the appliances with alcohol.

I don't remember how I lived through the day that followed. I took the kids to school mechanically and went to work myself. Only then, a day later, I gradually began to come to my

senses. But anyway, as soon as I started telling someone what had happened, my voice cracked and I started crying.

I didn't say anything to my parents – they are elderly people, and I don't fully understand what their reaction might be. My closest relative is my husband. He shares my position on what is happening in Ukraine, and generally strongly supports me in everything. He is on my side now, too, of course.

After everything that happened, Varya and I had the following conversation. I asked her: "Varya, tell me, what do you think about all this? Maybe you've drawn some conclusions?" I was expecting her to say something like, "I realized I need to be more careful", but she smiled and said, "We need to get out of here".

For example, we used to live in the small town where I come from, then we moved to Moscow. I used to explain that we had moved because I had not been able to feed them on the salary I had been getting there. My children live in a world far from what is shown on TV. We travel abroad, they know what life is like there. They have something to compare it to.

I don't bring politics into our conversations. I only say that the war is bad, that I stand up for the good and I want to leave Russia. I think they understand what my stance is, but we don't discuss it directly. If they ask me something, I tell them. They're just kids and they think about it all in their own way. Varya sometimes tells me that she and her classmates sometimes have discussions about politics. In March she even came home and told me that someone in class was wearing the letter Z on their backpack. But they do not quarrel about it, everyone is friends with each other. Varya explained the Z to me this way: "The parents must have put it up."

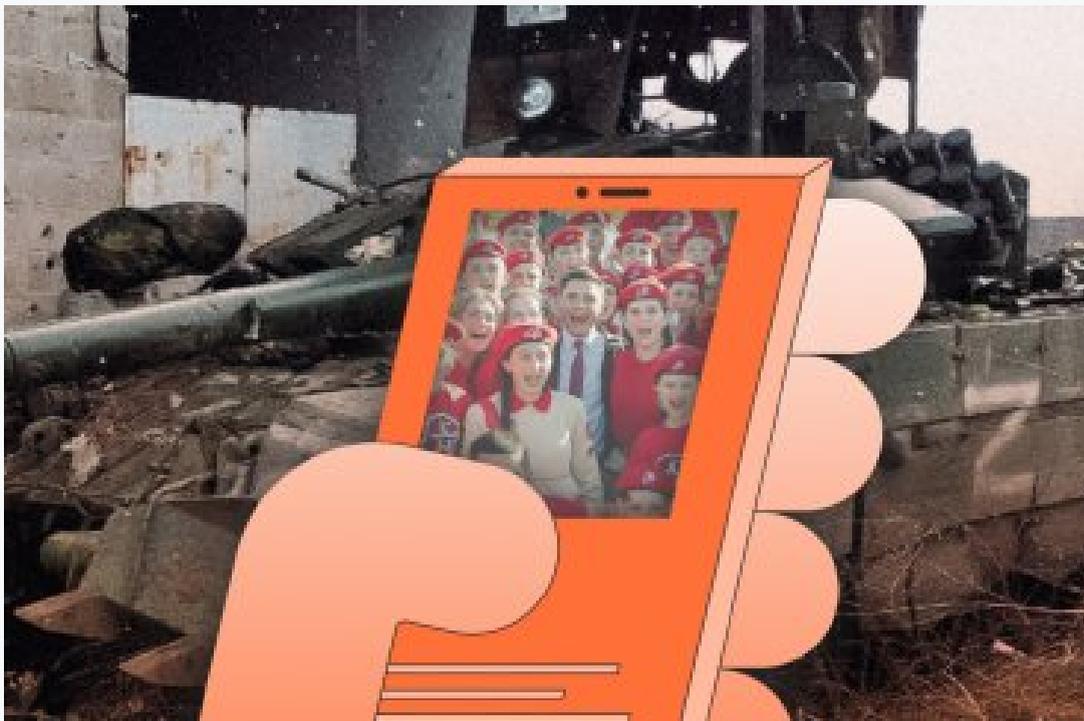
After the visit of the police, of course, I insisted that my daughter change her profile picture and bought her a new SIM card. I asked her not to tell anyone her number. It's really

upsetting that the police had her personal data. But Varya is very sociable and social, and a few days later she gave some new friend her phone number.

We are now seeing a psychologist with the children to work through the situation. The thing is that Sonya became very reluctant to go to school, she says she is afraid, and she cries before every school day. Varya's attitude towards the teachers has changed drastically. She used to treat them all with respect, but now she can call someone names or speak negatively of someone.

*Recorded by Karina Merkuryeva*

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