



Gulia Mukhametzyanova / Photo from Mukhametzyanova's social media

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ARTICLES

“I want to show you that you don’t have to be silent”—Kazan resident speaks out against cyberbullying and police pressure due to her anti-war stance

In late January, Kazan resident Gulia Mukhametzyanova **was charged** with «discrediting» the Russian army. Since then, she has been monitored by security forces who contacted her from different numbers, sent telegrams, and warned her of problems if she didn’t appear in court. On April 14, Gulia **was fined** 30,000 rubles (US\$385). She believes the surveillance was triggered by her photo with an anti-war poster published in a local group.

Текст на русском

On January 17 [2023], I went to the center of Kazan with a poster that read «Stop the damn silence». The protest was conceived five minutes after I saw that all the other activists were gathering in the city center with posters. I decided that I also wanted to participate.

I wrote in the activist chat: «Who is in the center now?». Several people responded. At that moment, I was in the library — I took a piece of paper and a marker from the employee, made a poster and went to the city center with it. They took a photo of me. We usually send these photos to the «Navalny LIVE» Telegram channel, I have not posted them anywhere else.

A day later, I saw my photo in the «Kazan. Where to go» group on VKontakte social network. The admins of this group had already blocked me for anti-war statements. At the same time, the photo was published with a neutral caption: «Look, pickets are being organized in the city center now».



Gulia Mukhametzyanova in a solitary picket, Kazan, January 17, 2023 /
Photo: personal archive

Of course, I immediately started reading the comments. 99% were hate-filled. I don't know if the admins of the group intended to hype me up or if it was just a coincidence. The most interesting thing was that even people I knew personally left negative comments under that post.

It was very unpleasant to read this. The commentators were very critical of my appearance. Everyone wrote that I didn't

know how to apply makeup, that I was «so ugly», «a wog» or «let's chip in for plastic surgery». By the way, no one ever chipped in for the surgery. I'm still waiting.

Now I can talk about what happened with humor, because I worked through this situation with a psychologist, but at first it was certainly very offensive. I didn't do anything to these people. I just came out with a piece of paper to stand in the city center.

The photo of my picket ended up going viral in the VKontakte group. It got 100,000 views, whereas a typical post there would only get under 20,000. I thought the hate would end there. But it didn't: on January 21st, I was charged with «discrediting» the army (Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses — *OVD-Info*). I found out about this much later.

Roughly at the same time I started getting phone calls from unfamiliar numbers. In the GetContact app they showed up as «the investigative committee», «police search», «investigative division», or «police major». I realized they wanted to catch me. Obviously, I didn't pick up the phone and didn't respond to the calls.

After a while, a telegram arrived at my official place of residence. It contained an administrative offense protocol for «discrediting» the Russian military. It didn't state what exactly was the offense.

I don't live at my registered address, so I didn't respond to the telegram. After some time, new telegrams and registered letters began arriving at the same address. I just left them lying in the mailbox. If the police want something from me — they can come to me themselves.

At the same time, one of the pro-government Telegram channels posted a message about four Kazan activists who wanted to create a branch of the «Civic Initiative» political

party. My name was also mentioned there. The message was roughly this: «Here are people who didn't make it abroad on time. Looks like they want to „sit it out“ [jail pun] in Russia, so they're organizing their own opposition party here. Well, have some patience. This is just the beginning». Obviously, I got scared. Meanwhile, calls from strange phone numbers continued to come in, and I continued to ignore them.

In late March, my party posted on social media, announcing our plans to participate in the Homeless Persons Day event on the 31st of March. It was organized by a Kazan-based homeless shelter called «Human». The participants were invited to join the rally and meet us — party members — in person.

As I understand it, the law enforcement officials saw these posts and came to the event. After it was over, two people in uniforms approached me and said, «You should know who we are». They brought up the «discrediting the military» report and wanted me to sign some documents. When I asked them what exactly I did to discredit the army, they said they didn't know. To find out, I needed to come to the local police station No. 16 «Yapeeva». I told them that I didn't understand anything and that I would only talk further in the presence of a lawyer.

As I later learned from the court website records, the hearing was held without me. However, the court sent my case back to the police several times. It's possible that there were some mistakes in the report or that the judge turned out to be a conscientious person.

However, the story didn't end there. Two days after the Homeless Person's Day event, a friend of mine called me. She told me that she had received a call from an unknown number, and she picked up. It turned out to be a call from the police. She was told to inform me that if I don't come to the police department, there will be consequences.

I think they called her because we met the day before — we were sitting in a diner. Probably, the police tracked us down there.

I think that the attention from the security forces towards me was caused by the post with my photo in the local social media group. I think so because I had participated in anti-war pickets before, but nobody cared back then. For example, on December 4th, I took to the streets with a poster that read «I have the right to say „no“ to war according to the Constitution of the Russian Federation». Nobody knew about this rally. But after my photo appeared in the local group, even friends of friends started messaging me, saying «Wow, you're a celebrity now».



Gulia Mukhametzyanova in a solitary picket, Kazan, December 4, 2022.
Photo: [Activatica.org](https://activatica.org)

I started to get interested in politics back in 2021 thanks to TikTok. At that time, Alexei Navalny was returning to Russia. I was scrolling through my TikTok feed and kept coming across the same sound and the same video compilation: Navalny and his wife sitting on a plane. His wife [says](#), «Boy, bring us some vodka, we're going home». I thought, «Who are these strange people? Why is this video

even in my recommendations?». I didn't know anyone except for Putin in Russian politics back then.

Later, I began to come across snippets of Navalny's videos and TikToks about Nemtsov. I started reading more news and understanding what was going on in the country.

Then Navalny was detained, and protests erupted all over the country. I'm a fan of all things active — if people are gathering somewhere, I need to be there too. So that's how I was driven to participate in protest actions. I liked it. I went a whole year without detentions.

In 2022, right after the Russian troops invaded Ukraine, I realized that I couldn't stay silent. I didn't want people to be killed in my name.

On March 4th, I went out to film people in uniform in the center of Kazan, and I was immediately detained. At first, they surrounded me and demanded that I stop filming. I started to argue. They took me to the police station supposedly to check my documents. There, they issued a warning banning my participation in any unsanctioned events.

Nevertheless, on March 6th, I went out again. The police chief saw me and immediately ordered my arrest. They released me again without protocol.

Despite the warnings and the pressure from law enforcement, I continue to express my opinions on social media — I just can't let it go. I have an anti-war status in WhatsApp and a protest-themed avatar — I do everything I can. Because if you do nothing, you feel like a traitor to your country. I want to spread the truth and show that we shouldn't stay silent.

I'm afraid most of all for my mom. I worry that if I get arrested, she'll get very upset and something might happen to her. Of course, I don't tell her anything about my anti-war activities and the pressure from security forces. My mom

believes there's no need for us to mess with politics.
«We don't know everything, and politics is not our business»,
that's her position.

I mostly get support from friends and acquaintances who are activists. After the war started, my social circle changed dramatically. Many people unfollowed me on social media when I started writing about Ukraine. They called me a traitor. In the end, I lost almost all of my friends. It hurt a lot, but over the course of the year, I also made friends in political circles. I also frequently exchange messages with my acquaintances in the «Popular Politics» chat. They also support me. Many of them live in other countries. They say that they're always ready to host me if I do decide to leave Russia.

Recorded by Karina Merkurjeva

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