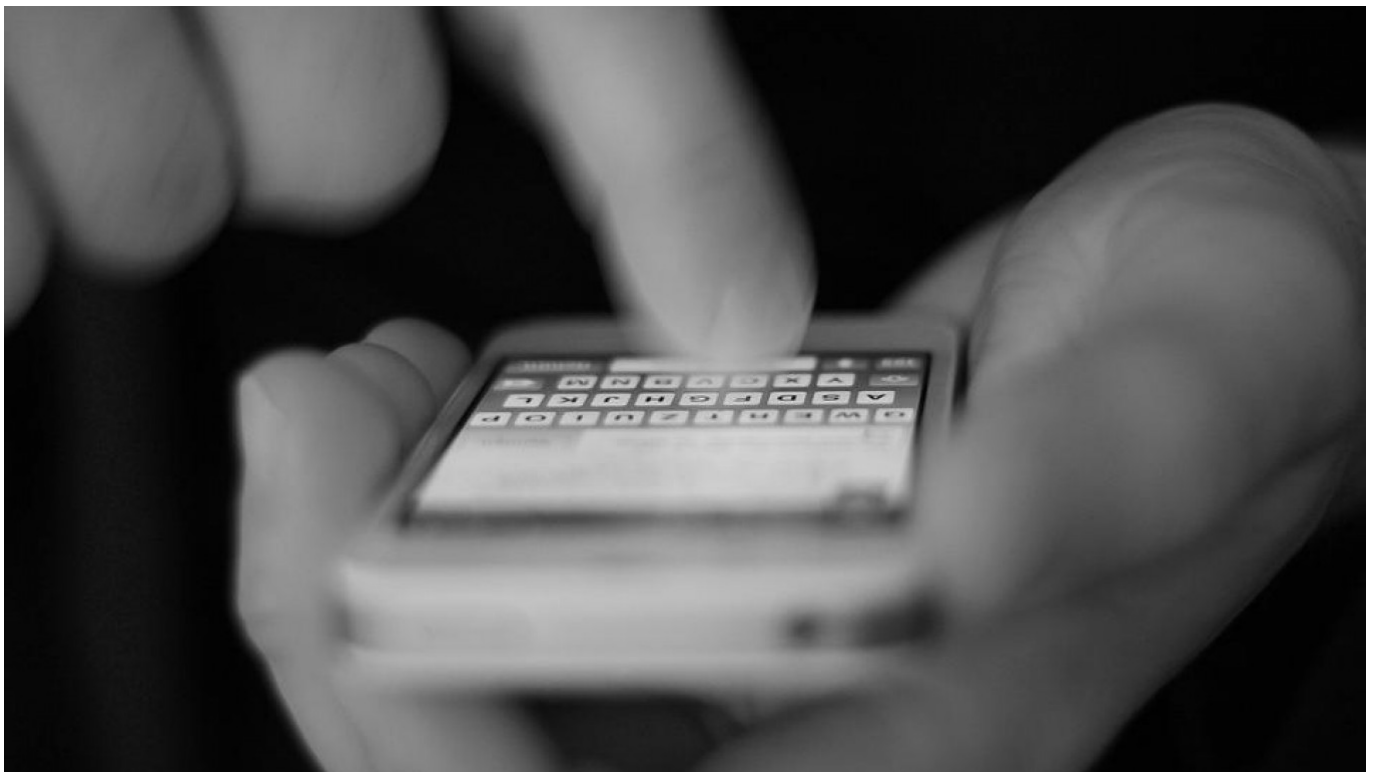


Jailed for a Text Message: Welcome to Krasnodar, the Epicenter of Russian Treason

By [Katie Marie Davies](#)

December 08, 2016



Relexahotels / Pixabay

It took just two text messages for Oksana Sevastidi to be convicted of treason.

The 46-year-old sales assistant was not involved in politics, according to [Russian human rights group Team 29](#). She worked at a local market in the Russian city of Sochi. She took time to care for her mother and grandmother. The family had already tasted hardship, fleeing violence in the self-declared Abkhazian republic in 1994.

But Sevastidi was also one of hundreds of local people who noticed a military train passing through the city in April 2008.

The train, packed with military equipment, was headed south towards Abkhazia.

When a Georgian friend, Timur Buskadze, later messaged to ask if she had seen anything unusual happening in Sochi, she told him about the convoy. The pair had met in the Georgian capital of Tblisi in 2005 and often exchanged messages. She thought little more about it.

The 2008 Abkhazia-Georgian war would break out just three months later. Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) took longer to swoop. They arrested Sevastidi in January 2015 — almost seven years after the original messages were sent. Officers alleged that Sevastidi's friend had in fact been a spy, supplying information to Georgian intelligence.

The train which Sevastidi had seen in 2008 was not part of a secret movement of troops. Neither the train's schedule nor its inventory had been classified information. But by providing Buskadze with details of what she had seen, Sevastidi had supposedly betrayed her country.

One FSB officer reassured Sevastidi's 70-year-old mother that her daughter would just have to “spend a year or so in prison, set her mind straight, lose some weight, and come back home.”

Instead she was held for over a year in pre-trial detention and sentenced to seven years of jail time in the distant Ivanovo region.

Sevastidi's story is not unique. Between 2013 and 2016, no less than 10 people have been convicted of treason and espionage in Russia's southern region of Krasnodar. The figure counts for almost a quarter of all such cases within Russia, placing the region at the heart of Russia's latest hunt for “traitors” and “spies,” [says Team 29](#).

A Common Tale

In April 2008, Georgian citizen Yekaterina Kharebava also sent text messages about military movements to friends across the border. When the Russian security services arrived at her door several years later, she willingly cooperated and “signed everything they gave her,” her lawyer, Leonid Erchenko, told Team 29. “She had no reason to expect foul play,” he said.

Kharebava was convicted of treason through espionage and jailed for six years.

She was released in 2016 following to a bilateral agreement between the Russian and Georgian governments. Two other Georgian woman were released at the same time, both apparently charged after telling friends and relatives back home about military buildup in the local area.

What will you do when they come for you? Read more on [Team 29 and their fight against Russia's FSB](#).

The information which Kharebava provided on her fellow detainees is helping activists to build a better picture of the government crackdown. Court documents in treason and espionage cases remain patchy, and names are often withheld. In three of the 10 espionage or treason cases in Krasnodar in the last three years, only the defendants' surnames have been made public. At least five cases have so far been linked to the 2008

Georgian war.

Details are scarce because the FSB's campaign in Krasnodar was not one of intimidation, Team 29 CEO Ivan Pavlov told The Moscow Times. Officials did not promote the cases via government public relations teams. Rather than targeting the women specifically, it's likely that government forces were simply gathering large-scale electronic surveillance in the local area.

The alleged "traitors" were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time — but realistically, only Sevastidi has any chance of seeing her ruling overturned. Procedural violations in her case mean that she could face a retrial, Pavlov says.

Climbing the ladder

Krasnodar officials have too much to lose to consider simply letting the women go. For officers in the FSB, investigating a high-profile treason case is a great way to move up in the ranks, Pavlov says.

Agents and officials further up the ladder are also desperate to prove themselves, says Russian security services expert Andrey Soldatov.

Another 13 Russians have been jailed for treason and espionage in the first half of 2016. Human rights activists are simply unable to look into their cases: personal details for half of the cases have been withheld.

"The security services have been ordered to focus their efforts on counterintelligence," says Soldatov. "Individual FSB officers and local departments are competing with each other to get the best possible results. Half of the 'terror acts' they 'prevented' were bomb scares, pranks carried out by school kids," he says.

Read more on Russia's war mentality: [Why did Russian convictions for treason triple in 2014?](#)

The Kremlin's fear of hidden saboteurs has grown to paranoia in the two years since the start of the Ukrainian conflict, Soldatov says. Now vaguely-worded laws, created in the wake of mass anti-Putin protests in 2011, are being used to neutralize perceived "threats" from Russia's streets with little in the way of due process.

Russians no longer need to divulge classified information to be judged as traitors. Anything which could be judged as "harmful to the state's security" is enough. The train which Sevastidi saw traveling through Sochi fell into this category.

She won't be the last "traitor" to be targeted by the law, Soldatov says.

"The FSB aren't really looking for spies: they need easy targets to boost their numbers," he says. "Statistics are all they care about. They will keep grabbing random people- and it's only going to get worse."

Russia's extremism witch hunt: Read more on [the librarian charged with 'inciting racial](#)

[hatred.'](#)

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/12/08/jailed-for-a-text-message-welcome-to-krasnodar-the-epicenter-of-russian-treason-a56474>