

Journalists Toe Fine Line With Opposition Politics

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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Journalists Leonid Parfyonov, left, and Oleg Kashin, right, at a protest in December on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. **Igor Tabakov**

Oleg Kashin lit another cigarette. His iPhone beeped, as it does every few minutes.

"They probably could have fired me for participating in the opposition rallies," he said, flicking aside the background image on his phone, Kazimir Malevich's "Reaper on a Red Background."

The stub where his left pinkie used to be wiggles like a pig's tail as he taps out a text message.

A political reporter for Kommersant, Kashin's work on pro-Kremlin youth groups and Khimki forest defenders likely led to the savage beating that almost killed him in 2010, leaving him in a medically induced coma with a broken leg, a fractured jaw and a pinkie that had to be amputated.

Given his knowledge of the system and the dangerous conditions under which he works, it's perhaps no surprise that Kashin greeted the resurgent opposition with enthusiasm.

But his participation in organizing protests hasn't made his bosses very happy.

"I even asked them once, 'Does this bother you?' They said, 'Yes, it does ...'" he said recently over coffee at a cafe in the hip Red October region, which has become a mecca for Moscow's so-called "creative class" of young media professionals and artists.

Since allegations of fraud in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections sparked unprecedented street protests, Kashin and other journalists have helped organize opposition rallies, found civil groups, and, of course, spread the word.

To an extent not seen since the early 1990s, journalists are using their deep awareness of the country's ills, sharp pens and, in some cases, their star power to promote a political cause.

But it has also forced them into an uncomfortable balancing act between participation and observation — between their personal desires as citizens and their professional responsibilities as journalists.

"It's like we're at war. We have the government on the one side with its gigantic administrative resources, including state-controlled TV. On the other side we have the 'Moscow media,'" said Andrei Loshak, editor-in-chief of Esquire Russia and a former reporter on state-controlled NTV.

Media outlets seen as opposition-friendly — in that they feature interviews with opposition leaders — include newspapers Kommersant and Vedomosti, Ekho Mosvki radio, culture magazines Afisha and Bolshoi Gorod, and TV channel Dozhd.

"It has become important to declare your politics. Anybody who doesn't look like a traitor, like they agree with the ugliness of the system," Loshak said.

At a Dec. 23 meeting for the committee organizing the following day's protest on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, four journalists — Kashin, Sergei Parkhomenko, Yury Saprykin and Olga Romanova — sat beside veteran opposition politicians Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov and civil activists like Lev Ponomarev.

Saprykin, Parkhomenko and Nemtsov discussed preparations, while Romanova — a former financial journalist and TV host who serves as the group's treasurer — reported on the committee's finances.

For the active journalists — Kashin and Saprykin, editorial director of Rambler-Afisha — the decision to serve on the committee raised the question of the appropriate line between covering a cause one sympathizes with and participating in it.

"It's not a natural situation, it's not a normal situation when journalists sit on the organizing committee. ... It would be like if a boxer called his own fight," Kashin said.

Saprykin later admitted to being torn between his professional impulses and his commitment to the cause.

"There have been moments over the last three months when, as a journalist located inside the process, I probably should have quickly run to the neighboring office of Lenta.ru and written a news article or a column," he said.

"I don't do it because, as a member of the organizing committee, I have to maintain silence and follow rules of a different cooperative etiquette. This is a problem," he said.

Prior to the disputed State Duma elections, Saprykin's Afisha was a hipster rag, covering pop culture and the arts. Kashin now describes it as "the most radical opposition journal."

Saprykin's own transition from a "good-humored, aging hipster" into a "thundering revolutionary," — as Loshak described him — speaks to a political awakening in Afisha's yuppie readership.

"At some point, the wealthy, well-traveled, cultured crowd realized that to build one's comfortable, beautiful world is impossible without participating in the running of the country," Loshak said.

Afisha's February 27 edition carried the cover "What's Happening? The New Politics ..." featuring a conversation with opposition leader Alexei Navalny, in which he urged protesters to join rallies and refuse to disperse.

Saprykin says he ended up on the organizing committee almost by accident.

After the first major rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 10, he wrote an article for Lenta.ru, which is owned by ProfMedia, the same company that owns Afisha, criticizing organizers for, among other things, failing to provide an adequate speaker system for the event.

"The next day, my colleague, Sergei Parkhomenko ... called and said, 'If you're so smart, why don't you come and tell us how it's done,'" Saprykin recalled.

He admits that he has probably crossed the line but says it could be worse.

"It's one thing when you write an article and then go agree with City Hall on the location of the next rally. That's a problem, but we can live with that. It's quite another when you write an article in the morning, and in the evening you write propaganda pamphlets," he said.

Besides, he insists that he has no control over the editorial content of the culture magazine, which is published only every other week.

"I don't do daily information journalism. ... News isn't my profession, at least now," he said.

Parkhomenko — the former editor of Itogi and Vokrug Sveta — has been perhaps the most active journalist in the opposition, although he is currently on professional hiatus.

He's been a member of the organizing committee and has participated in negotiations with City Hall. His Facebook page is effectively an opposition newsfeed.

But Parkhomenko says he sees no contradiction in a journalist becoming an activist.

"Don't mix up strictly political activity with the creation of a party or a movement and the

organizing committee for rallies. ... The organizing committee organizes rallies. The opposition organizes opposition," he said.

The opposition has largely organized through Facebook, and Ivan Zassoursky, a journalism professor at Moscow State University, points out that blogs and social media have become an increasingly popular outlet for journalists.

"Many journalists have discovered that aside from articles, where they appear quite dull, there are other platforms where they can write what they really think," he said.

If journalists have been among the first to throw their support behind the opposition, it might be because they've suffered uniquely in Vladimir Putin's Russia, Loshak said.

"Nobody's going to bother a designer who's sitting there doing Photoshop. ... The government doesn't directly affect you like it affects a journalist," Loshak said.

Dozens of journalists have been beaten and several killed since 2000. No one has been brought to justice for the attacks, which has been interpreted as a sign of tacit consent from the government. The country is consistently ranked among the world's most dangerous places to be a journalist.

"A political journalist in Russia writes from his knees," Parkhomenko said. "If he's part of the Kremlin pool, he tiptoes around, trying not to make too much noise, writes what they dictate and, not rising from his knees, runs the material off to his editors."

Romanova and Leonid Parfyonov lost their jobs on television after the state gobbled up private TV in the early 2000s and started enforcing a strongly pro-Kremlin line.

But for Romanova, her trauma goes far beyond journalism.

In 2008 her husband, businessman Alexei Kozlov, was sentenced to seven years in prison for fraud and embezzlement charges they say were fabricated by his former business partner, then-Federation Council Senator Vladimir Slutsker.

Romanova has led a highly public fight to free her husband, partly through Russia Behind Bars, a support and advocacy group she founded for the wrongfully imprisoned and their families.

Kozlov's sentence was later reduced to five years, and he was freed in September after the Supreme Court overturned the initial verdict and ordered a retrial. On March 15, his initial conviction was upheld by a lower court.

Opposition activity seemed to her like a natural extension of this fight.

"If you have a civil position, you can't help but be oppositional," she said after a recent meeting of Russia Behind Bars.

In mid-January, she and 15 other outspoken opposition figures — including four journalists — established the League of Voters, an umbrella organization designed to coordinate grassroots civil activists.

Kashin says the fact that journalists took a leading role from the start was an indication of the failure of veteran opposition leaders — including Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov — to inspire the tens of thousands who showed up at Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 10.

"There wasn't anybody else to do it. Alexei Navalny was sitting in prison at the time, so he couldn't participate. ... Journalists were literally forced to go," he said.

According to a Levada Center poll of participants at the Dec. 24 rally, Parfyonov was ranked as the most trusted opposition figure, followed by Navalny. Nemtsov tied former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin for ninth place out of 19, with only 13 percent of respondents saying they trusted him most.

It is important to note that some journalists have come out in support of Putin, including Pavel Gusev, editor-in-chief of Moskovsky Komsomolets, and Valery Fadeyev, editor-in-chief of Expert magazine.

"I don't like what's going on at Bolotnaya," Fadeyev [told](#) journalists in February.

"Not because people can't express their opinions. It's normal to hold rallies. But when the destruction of state institutions begins, when they demand that the Duma be declared illegitimate and they say the elections are illegitimate ahead of time, ... it's undoubtedly the path to 1917 and an Orange Revolution."

Mikhail Leontyev, a well-known television journalist, told Putin supporters at a Feb. 23 rally at Luzhniki stadium that Putin was responsible for saving Russia and accused "our enemies" of wanting to turn the clock back 20 years so that the country "attempted suicide again."

Zassoursky, the journalism professor, said it was not uncommon for journalists to venture into politics during times of political uncertainty. He compared the current situation to the United States during the anti-war movement of the 1960s and '70s and the Soviet Union during perestroika.

"Journalists formed a substitute political system. They doubled as people's representatives, speaking out on the people's behalf. In a way, we've returned to that," he said.

Several popular journalists, including Alexander Nevzorov and Alexander Krutov, even became Duma deputies, and pro-perestroika periodicals Ogonyok and Moskovskiy Novosti served as "stand-in" parties, Kashin said.

The current crop of politically active journalists say they'd rather go back to journalism than become politicians, and some have already started to take a back seat to professional politicians.

"The last time I went to an organizing-committee meeting was before the second Bolotnaya protest," Kashin said, adding that he believed journalists would increasingly resume their natural role as observers and leave politics to the professional politicians.

Saprykin also describes himself as something of a dilettante and said the Afisha edition devoted to politics was a one-off event.

He also believes journalists exert a stronger influence on the opposition through their articles than they do by personal contacts with opposition leaders.

"It's a collective, invisible brain trust. ... Journalists are very good at forming program goals and identifying problems that the opposition has to solve," he said.

Parkhomenko says his future plans aren't connected to politics at all. "If an appropriate and correct reason for another rally arrives, I will probably take part in it, if not, then I won't," he said.

Seven years after he left national television, Parfyonov recently found himself back on the airwaves with a series of interviews on Kommersant TV with political figures in the run-up to the March election.

In a recent interview on Afisha.ru, he reiterated his desire to stay in journalism. "My place is on the sidewalk, while people march down the road. ... I want to remain a journalist. Besides, I'm too old to learn another profession."

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