

Ashurkov Bridging the Gap Between Business and Politics for Navalny

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ashurkov

Almost a decade after Russia's richest man was jailed after funding groups opposed to Vladimir Putin, a former top bank manager is chipping at the wall between politics and business in a renewed challenge to the Russian president.

With his Wharton Business School degree and expensive suits, Vladimir Ashurkov, 40, cuts an unlikely figure within the rag-tag ranks of Russia's political opposition.

But his mission, far from the Moscow streets where protests against Vladimir Putin's rule have revived, is quietly enlisting financial backing from the country's business elite and young professionals for the six-month-old movement.

Earlier this week he published a list of the top donors to a fund set up by anti-corruption blogger and protest leader Alexei Navalny after persuading 10 top-flight businessmen —

whom he dubbed "the brave ones" — to break a taboo against overt support of Putin's adversaries.

"Our strategy has been to gather a critical mass of supporters who would not be afraid to say, 'Yes, I have supported this foundation,'" said Ashurkov, formerly director of group portfolio management at Alfa Bank.

"But, of course, this is also a test of what is possible and what's not possible in Russia. We'll find out."

Opposition politics have long been forbidden territory for Russia's business elite since Putin came to power in 2000 and then brought the powerful oligarchs to heel.

Once a powerful oil tycoon and Russia's wealthiest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky ran afoul of the Kremlin after funding opposition groups and condemning high-level corruption. He remains in prison on what critics call politically motivated charges of tax fraud and theft.

Ashurkov himself was asked to resign from his post at Alfa Bank over his involvement with Navalny. Some of the donors have stressed that their support is not a political stance.

The minimum donation by those on the list, which includes managers at some of Russia's top businesses, is \$10,000. The money is dedicated to paying lawyers who work under Navalny to expose high-level corruption and other opposition initiatives.

In some ways the quiet, unassuming Ashurkov, who speaks in measured, thought-out sentences, is a perfect counterweight to Navalny, 35, a fiery activist whose arrests by riot police have made him a star among Russia's growing opposition.

In a measure of his popularity, Navalny has collected more than \$300,000, mostly through small donations of \$10 to \$15, since opening his anti-graft site Rospil.ru to online payments in February.

Since Putin's return to the Kremlin in March for a six-year presidential term, opposition leaders have sought long-term backers for Web-focused efforts to discredit authorities and revive flagging protests, which were sparked by allegations of fraud by the ruling party in December's parliamentary elections.

Navalny gained notoriety on Russia's blogosphere using minority shares in Russian state companies to expose corruption, a major source of middle-class disgruntlement and arguably the Achilles heel of Putin's government.

The activities of the two men, both educated at Ivy League universities in the United States, have sparked accusations that the anti-Putin movement is backed by his detractors in the West and funded by foreign governments.

Ashurkov dismisses the accusation.

Among those investing in Navalny's fund are Roman Borisovich, vice president of Russia's largest insurance firm, and Alexei Savchenko, head of strategic planning at Alfa Group, one of Russia's largest privately owned investment groups.

"Discontent is growing throughout the entire population and, of course, more so among the elite, who are used to traveling to the West and understand that Russia deserves a much higher standard of living and freedom than it has now," Ashurkov said.

"The erosion of the elite's support for Putin — all this will inevitably lead to change in Russia."

Putin, 59, has dismissed the street protesters, branding them chattering monkeys and pointing to their lack of a clear leader. The Kremlin has embarked on only limited political reforms in response to recent demonstrations, which at their height attracted 100,000 people on the streets of Moscow.

But the protest movement has deprived Putin of his aura of invincibility, and Ashurkov hopes that going public with Navalny's sponsors will inspire others to join his cause, despite the risk that their businesses could come under state pressure.

For many businessmen, Khodorkovsky's continued imprisonment — he is due for release in 2016 — still serves as a warning.

"Our opponents are quite strong. They have all the power, they have unlimited financial resources, and they are not afraid to use very repressive and dubious tactics," Ashurkov said.

"Our message is that these people are not afraid, [and] you shouldn't be afraid either."

Ashurkov's former boss, Russian tycoon Mikhail Fridman, said Ashurkov had to choose between politics and business.

"We live in Russia and, without a doubt, being involved in such active political life in our Russian context is not fully tolerable for business," Fridman told Dozhd TV.

Ashurkov said he believes he is part of a movement that will change Russia's political landscape and sees Navalny as an alternative to Putin's 12-year dominance at the center of a tightly controlled political system.

"Could Navalny be the head of a political party? At some point, for sure."

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