

Disabled Discrimination Incident in Russia Reflects Endemic Problem, Experts Say

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Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova

A high-profile incident in which Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova's sister, who has autism and cerebral palsy, was made to leave a cafe for “scaring off clients” has elicited a storm of outrage on social networks, but disabled people and specialists say the incident is far from isolated and only illustrates the challenges faced by disabled people across the country.

“In our country, disabled people are regularly not allowed into expensive establishments or on planes, and are refused all sorts of services,” Yevgenia Voskoboinikova, a Russian journalist and wheelchair user, told The Moscow Times. “If it wasn't for Oksana [Vodianova] being the relative of a model known everywhere around the world, no one would have known of the incident.”

The episode that made headlines this week took place at a cafe in the sisters' native city of Nizhny Novgorod. Oksana Vodianova, 27, and her carer were asked to leave the premises of the Flamingo cafe for “scaring off their clients,” the supermodel recounted in a Facebook post published Wednesday and widely shared on social media.

“Go get treatment, and get your kid treated too — and only then show up in a public place,” the owner of the cafe told the carer, according to Vodianova's post.

The model noted that the cafe was virtually empty, and that the only other customer had told the owner to leave the two women alone. The owner threatened to call security, and Vodianova's mother, Larisa Kusakina, arrived at the establishment. After complaining to the owner about the treatment received by her daughter, she was detained by the police for disorderly conduct, according to Vodianova's post.

“When they took my mother to the local [police] station, they recognized her and were surprised; they said that they would not deal with the matter and that she should be taken to the central [police] station,” Vodianova wrote. Kusakina subsequently filed a cross-complaint against the owner of the cafe.

“It pains me that this happened to my mother, Oksana and her carer,” Vodianova wrote. “The owner should have been taken to the station for insulting people and discrimination; why did they take my mother?”

Tip of the Iceberg

Vodianova, who set up the Naked Heart Foundation in 2004 to help children in need, urged the readers of her post to “help people with special needs and their families be happy” and to support the work of charities assisting the disabled.

The post solicited outraged responses and outpourings of solidarity on social media, as well as deeper reflections on the ways in which people with disabilities and special needs are treated in Russia today.

“Nobody listens until the stars speak out on the topic. That's probably normal. But we need to use the chance to bring about change,” Russian playwright Yevgeny Kazachkov wrote on his Facebook page, linking to Vodianova's post.

The incident also elicited responses at an official level. The Investigative Committee has launched a case into the violation of Oksana Vodianova's rights, Russian news channel Vesti.ru reported Thursday, and the same day, Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko released a statement on the upper chamber of parliament's website.

“We need to remember that laws and multiple projects, large and small, such as wheelchair ramps, use of special symbols and other measures helping the disabled to use urban infrastructure is only a part of the effort required,” the statement said.

“We all need to understand that the psychological and moral readiness of society to accept people with special needs, and to communicate with them as with equals, without stereotypes, is the main indicator of the moral health of society and its development.”

Changing Attitudes

Activists said that the stigma against the disabled can only be defeated by shifting the focus toward society. “The society should be aware that accessibility relates not only to technical issues, but also to the elimination of barriers in perception and communication,” said Dmitry Polikanov, president of the Co-yedininiye (Con-nection) support foundation for the deaf and blind.

“One of the striking examples for me was the attitude in supermarkets, which prefer to isolate deaf and blind people and not let them in, rather than try to assist them with their shopping,” said Polikanov. “Shops are not equipped with Braille signs, and security personnel and shop assistants are not trained to deal with the disabled.”

“I was personally diagnosed with autism, so I am familiar with the situation and I believe that we need to work toward raising awareness among society,” said Anna Mikhailenko, coordinator of inclusive education programs at Perspektiva, an organization that campaigns for the rights of people with disabilities and works toward the improvement of their living conditions.

“Many problems derive from a lack of knowledge, not from the evil nature of some people,” she added.

Soviet Legacy

Part of the problem, experts say, is that the response to conceal the existence of disabled people is engrained in society. In Soviet times, people with disabilities and special needs often lived segregated and ignored.

“Overall the Soviet state's policy toward people with disabilities was to hide them from view, often warehousing them in special boarding schools and nursing homes, and provide them with the minimum needed to exist — a small pension and a few services, but not much else,” Sarah Phillips, a professor at Indiana University said.

Phillips, who has devoted her research to the topic of disability in the Soviet Union, noted that the situation has improved in recent years, with people with disabilities receiving improved living conditions, as well as educational and employment opportunities.

But cases of neglect and abuse are still widespread. A report published by Human Rights Watch in 2014 showed that 30 percent of children with disabilities in Russia live in state orphanages in conditions of violence and isolation.

“Children described how orphanage staff beat them, used physical restraints to tie them to furniture, or gave them powerful sedatives in efforts to control behavior that staff deemed undesirable,” the report reads.

Right Direction

During the past few years, however, Russia has seen improvement in the lot of its disabled. Ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, the president of the International Paralympic

Committee Sir Philip Craven praised Russia for its efforts in creating a barrier-free environment in the Olympic city in a statement published on the committee's website.

Last March the government introduced new housing rules making it obligatory for all new Russian real estate to have disabled access.

Denise Roza, director of Perspektiva, said her organization had taken to court two cases in which people with disabilities — one in a wheelchair and one who was blind — were not allowed on a plane unaccompanied. The organization won both cases and subsequently, discrimination legislation was amended, she said.

Roza said she believes that incidents like that involving Vodianova happen often, but go unreported.

“It was a good thing, because it's going to raise awareness,” she said. “It's an alarm going off that there's a lot of changes to be done.”

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