

Prominent Russian Activist Jailed for Anti-Putin Bolotnaya Protest Walks Free

By [Eva Hartog](#)

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Alexei Gaskarov **TASS**

The wife of opposition activist Alexei Gaskarov has imagined his release “1,277 times,” she says — the exact number of days he has spent behind bars.

On Thursday it finally happened. Gaskarov, 31, walked out the doors of a rickety prison on the outskirts of Tula, a two-hour drive south from Moscow. He'd served out his 3.5-year sentence. Several dozen relatives, friends, and fellow activists made the journey, and braved the chilly October weather, to meet him.

With the release, freedom finally comes to one of the central opposition figures in the so-called “Bolotnaya case,” which has targeted more than 30 people who participated in a mass protest in Moscow in May 2012 — the last major anti-Kremlin demonstration witnessed in Russia.

It marks the end of “a very complicated time,” says Gaskarov’s father, Vladimir, who’s standing around the corner from the prison, after guards near the main entrance chased away Gaskarov’s welcoming committee.

Despite the smiles, there is a weighty feeling in the air. “We realize it’s also the beginning of more difficulties. How to find work and so on,” his mother Irina says.

The trepidation is shared by many of those involved in the Bolotnaya trials. As far as the government is concerned, they are enemies of the state.

On May 6, 2012 , Gaskarov and his then-fiancee Anna Gaskarova were among tens of thousands who joined a march against corruption and vote-rigging on the eve of Putin’s third term.

Around the Bolotnaya Square, across the river from the Kremlin, protesters were met by a phalanx of riot police who blocked their way forward. Caught up in a bottleneck, some of the protesters clashed with baton-wielding riot police.

Video footage shows Gaskarov pulling an officer away from one of the participants of the march. Another video shows Gaskarov himself being kicked in the head while on the ground. After the chaotic demonstration, Gaskarov filed an abuse complaint with the police.

Nothing came of it. Instead, more than a year after the incident, Gaskarov himself was slapped with charges for participating in a mass riot and using violence against a law enforcement officer.

Until the end, his relatives fought for an early release, to no avail. His last court appeal was rejected in June, when a judge explained that Gaskarov didn't deserve an early release because he'd failed on several occasions to greet prison authorities properly.

Gaskarov’s imprisonment and subsequent hearings were politically motivated, his wife told journalists in an interview the day before his release.

“It showed how flawed the justice system is,” she said. “When there’s a political component to a case, at all levels there is an inertia to keep someone incarcerated that we couldn’t beat.”

The couple got married while Gaskarov was still behind bars, so they could maximize her visitation hours. Once every three months, they had three days to play house. “It was a completely unnatural situation,” says Gaskarova. “Your entire relationship is compressed in those three days, whether you have a fight or a beautiful moment.”

Embed:

Meet Alexei Gaskarov, who spent 3.5 yrs in jail for protesting v Kremlin. Yesterday he walked free and I was there: <https://t.co/xiA3QvTNZk>
[pic.twitter.com/htToGVzo7p](https://t.co/xiA3QvTNZk)

— Eva Hartog Skoro (@EvaHartog) [October 28, 2016](#)

“Don't Turn Your Back on Protest”

In that unnatural situation, they kept themselves distracted by planning for an uncertain future.

Unlike many of those jailed in the Bolotnaya case, Gaskarov was an active political figure before his arrest.

In his hometown of Zhukovsky outside Moscow, he was a prominent left-wing activist and one of the leaders of Russia's so-called anti-fascist movement that arose in response to an increase in xenophobic attacks and neo-Nazi sympathizers in the 2000s. In 2010, he was briefly detained over protests against the razing of a forest, but the charges were dropped.

The Russia of those days is one that some protesters now look upon with nostalgia.

“Back in the early 2000s, I chained myself to practically every single ministry building in one-man pickets and got off with a 500-ruble fine,” says one of Gaskarov's fellow activists wistfully.

Since the Bolotnaya protests, the Kremlin has introduced new measures to nip any sign of protest in the bud. Protesting without permission, even by yourself, more than twice can land you in jail. So can “liking” or sharing anything on social media deemed “extremist” by the authorities.

The increased risks of protesting combined with a surge of patriotism following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 mean that a repeat of protests like those in 2011 and 2012 has become difficult to imagine.

But with the release of grassroots protesters like Gaskarov, some of the former defiance could return.

“The right to free assembly is a basic right and you can't turn your back on it,” he told The Moscow Times, less than an hour after walking out of prison. “No matter what the current regime is, protests are a chance to influence our country.”

Gaskarov acknowledges that there are risks to demonstrations, “but rejecting the possibility to protest is stupid. We can't do that,” he says.

His young wife is more hesitant. While she admits that Gaskarov has a societal role to play, having her partner incarcerated twice is more than enough.

“He was always in the risk-group, that's why he was jailed on the Bolotnaya charges, but now that risk has doubled,” she said. “Part of his release is going to help him understand that in today's Russia the boundary of what is, and what isn't allowed is no longer clear,” she says.

Or, in case that tactic fails, “friends of ours have suggested getting a mortgage, so he can focus on petty, bourgeois things as a distraction,” she jokes.

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