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Theater Director in Russia Accused of Harassing and Raping Young Actresses

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Zurab Nanobashvili **Facebook**

A theater director in central Russia has been accused by four young actresses of illicit sexual behavior between 2012 and April 2018, including rape and attempted rape.

The global #MeToo movement has largely bypassed Russia in the past year, with a State Duma deputy holding on to his mandate despite accusations by several journalists in one of the country's highest-profile sexual harassment cases.

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Vologoda drama theater artistic director Zurab Nanobashvili was accused of lewd acts by two underage actresses, local media reported this week. A preliminary inquiry has been launched to determine whether to press charges, the Meduza news website reported Friday, following

up on the reports.

“He began to openly touch our breasts, butts and lower abdomens,” Meduza quoted Natalia, who asked her real name to be withheld, as saying about an encounter that allegedly took place with the theater director and a fellow acting student in mid-April.

Natalia further recalled Nanobashvili, 49, forcing the two young women to simulate an oral act, saying “I was numb and I obeyed.”

When the director of the art school where Nanobashvili taught acting classes confronted him about the incident, which Natalya says began as “relaxation exercises,” Nanobashvili reportedly replied that “he was only ‘playing’.”

Nanobashvili, who has put on plays at the Vologda theater since 2001 and was awarded the Honored Artist of Russia title last month, told Meduza it was “premature” to reply to the accusations.

“I understand that this is a hyped up subject, but this isn’t America,” he told the outlet.

21-year-old Polina, who also asked Meduza to withhold her real name, said Nanobashvili “used the same methods on me, only much harsher” after she had just turned 18 in 2015. In her case, Polina said, the “relaxation exercises” ended with him raping her and causing ruptures.

“I understood what country we live in. I would be dragged through the offices, but in the end, they wouldn’t necessarily open a criminal case,” she was quoted when explaining her unwillingness to go through with her charges.

Olga Matskevich, the only victim to allow Meduza to use her real name, claimed that Nanobashvili tried to rape her when she was a 22-year-old actress visiting from another city in 2012.

“If you saw me, you’d realize right away that I’m unable to rape,” the theater director was quoted as saying, explaining that the accusations “are clearly persecution.”

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