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Editor's Resignation Signals Milestone #MeToo Moment in Russia

The incident marks the first time a Russian public figure has resigned over allegations of sexual harassment.

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Ivan Kolpakov / Facebook

In a landmark moment, Russia has seen the first resignation of a public figure over claims of sexual harassment.

On Friday, the Meduza news website announced its chief editor Ivan Kolpakov had stepped down following reports that he had sexually harassed a co-worker's wife at a staff party.

"This is a milestone," co-chair of the Russian Journalists and Media Workers Union Anton Karliner told The Moscow Times. "Of course this does not solve all of our problems, but the

resignation is a good step."

Kolpakov, who served as Meduza's chief editor since 2016, reportedly groped a colleague's wife at a party last month before telling her: "You're the only one I can get away with harassing."

Earlier this week, Meduza's board of directors reinstated Kolpakov after he voluntarily stepped aside for two weeks.

The move drew accusations of hypocrisy in a #MeToo era that has largely been ignored or ridiculed in Russia, especially after Meduza's CEO and media veteran Galina Timchenko jumped to Kolpakov's defense.

"Those who look at themselves in the mirror and claim they have not made any mistakes or done anything nasty in their life are either liars or bastards," she wrote on Facebook in support of Kolpakov.

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Founded by a group of Russian journalists in Latvia in 2014, Meduza has fashioned itself as Russia's pre-eminent liberal outlet. It took an active stance in covering Russia's fledgling #MeToo movement when earlier this year four journalists accused State Duma deputy Leonid Slutsky of sexual harassment.

As the movement was reaching its peak in the United States last fall, Meduza ran an explainer to clarify what constitutes sexual harassment for a society in the early stages of considering its implications. The outlet also published a how-to-manual on how to deal with harassment by a superior in the workplace.

"Ironically, Meduza had been one of the few outlets to try to bring attention to the #MeToo movement," said Karliner.

On Oct. 20, one of its most senior figures himself reportedly sexually harassed a colleague's wife.

The colleague, according to a Nov. 6 post on Meduza's Facebook page outlining what occurred, reportedly confronted Kolpakov at the office the next day. Kolpakov apologized to the employee and to his wife in writing — she wouldn't meet with him in person.

But the day after Kolpakov returned to work this week, the colleague, who could not be reached for comment for this article, had resigned.

Things got worse from there. A video surfaced, allegedly depicting Kolpakov during his time as editor of an outlet called Salt, lifting women's skirts in an advertisement for the outlet. Meanwhile, satirical memes circulating social media rebranded Meduza as "MeTooZa."

With the outlet facing mounting public indignation, Meduza reported on Friday that Kolpakov was quitting.

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In a Facebook post explaining the decision, Kolpakov said he was leaving despite "categorically" rejecting the groping allegations. (In an earlier post, he claimed he was very drunk and did not remember the incident, but admitted that what he'd done was "reprehensible.")

The decision on Friday seemed to soothe the anger around Kolpakov even though some voices argued that Meduza's reputation, and mainly that of its CEO, have been irreparably damaged.

"This is the right outcome," a former Meduza employee told The Moscow Times, requesting anonymity to speak candidly about a powerful figure in a tight-knit industry. "But Timchenko and Meduza are inseparable as a company, and this has taken place under her watch."

The former employee, who was a regular contributor, said that what had first attracted her to work for Meduza was that the outlet vowed to take no prisoners.

"I remember Galina [Timchenko] describing that she picked the image of Meduza" — a reference to the Greek monster whose gaze would turn anyone that looked at her into stone — "because the outlet would not spare anyone," the former employee said. "Well, until public pressure, they didn't want to spare one of their own."

What has been seen as hypocrisy has been taken with glee by pro-Kremlin figures, who have used the case to defend their own agenda of promoting traditional values.

"Meduza would not have had to fire Kolpakov if it did not demand that we fire [State Duma deputy] Slutsky and did not try to introduce all of that fashionably American stuff into our quiet, patriarchal life," Margarita Simonyan, the chief editor of the Kremlin-funded RT news network wrote on her Telegram channel following the announcement earlier Friday.

Earlier, Russian columnist Oleg Kashin said that the Meduza scandal was a test for Russian progressives. And that by not firing Kolpakov, they were "still only imitating the West." After Kolpakov's resignation, he said, "They passed the test."

"We might not have a concrete movement yet," said Karliner of the Journalists and Media Workers Union. "But this shows that we are starting to change. If this had happened 10 years ago, Kolpakov would not have resigned."

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