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Meduza's #MeToo Scandal Has Changed Russia for Good (Op-ed)

Editor Ivan Kolpakov's resignation, which was protested by Russia's media elite, marks the beginning of a new era.

By Bella Rapoport

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Ivan Kolpakov / Yevgenia Nikolayeva

Russia's media scene has been rocked by scandal in recent weeks, with far-reaching consequences.

Ivan Kolpakov, the editor-in-chief of Russia's main liberal news site, Meduza, resigned last Thursday to quell fervor over allegations he sexually harassed a colleague's wife at a party. Readers were indignant over a decision by the outlet's Board of Directors to reproach, but not punish him.

As the scandal unfolded — and days before Kolpakov eventually announced his own

resignation — the employee quit his job.

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This incident marks an important moment in Russia. For one, it highlights that women have the right to protection from harassment by men. Second, it underscores the double standard by which intoxicated women are blamed for whatever happens to them, but drunken men have a "right to make mistakes" and are even justified in their behavior. It also presents us with an opportunity to create a new workplace ethic.

Perhaps most importantly, however, it is the first case in which a high-ranking man suffered at least some consequences for behavior that nobody had previously questioned. Sexual harassment, it seems, no longer goes unnoticed.

Within Russia's media circle, most observers watched the Kolpakov scandal play out through the lens of the liberal elite or tusovka. The word, which entered into Russian slang in the 1980s, used to describe a kind of gathering of people with shared interests who led similar lifestyles. Nowadays, it usually refers to a clique of liberal journalists, creatives and others in the so-called "in-crowd" of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In an attempt to preserve the inviolability of this clique, many of its members began posting mean-spirited things about Kolpakov's alleged victim on Facebook. And because many members of the "tusovka" are well-known Russian journalists, artists and writers, it was almost impossible to ignore their frenzied posts.

The tusovka didn't stop at inappropriate turns of speech and victim blaming. Dozens wrote that the issue should not have been settled by Meduza's Board of Directors, but rather by the husband of the victim simply punching Kolpakov in the face.

However, no one from this clique proposed punching Russian lawmaker Leonid Slutsky when he was accused by several journalists earlier this year of misconduct. And when the Kremlin uses physical violence to solve its problems, the tusovka are the loudest critics.

Every incident of violence or harassment, therefore is deemed "good" or "bad" by the tuskovka based solely on whether those deeds were committed by "good" or "bad" people. Respected figures from this clique are generally known for pronouncing their desire for Western values, but when one of their own — Kolpakov — is implicated, those grand aspirations fell by the wayside.

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There are other lapses in logic here as well. Two people ultimately resigned their posts at Meduza, but for some reason, only Kolpakov's career was lamented. In fact, many women quit their jobs or end their careers due to sexual harassment by their bosses or university deans. Unlike Kolpakov, they don't have a host of new employers lining up to hire them.

Members of the group have vociferously opposed discussing the incident out in the open. Yet, at the same time, they are insisting that the aggrieved couple publicly answer the criticism of

their allegations. The tusovka has demanded to know whether the woman was also drunk at the time – as though that would make her somehow complicit in the act.

Another odd claim is that Meduza somehow brought this problem on itself through its treatment of women's issues and its coverage of sexual harassment stories. By this logic, the publication could have avoided all the trouble by never writing about harassment in the first place.

Some women seem to be more interested in speaking out in defense of Kolpakov, and, in general, other men who have come under attack from other victims. Strangely, these women are the most zealous among many voices on Facebook. All cliques are based on the same principles: insularity, elitism, hierarchy, a desire to solve all problems away from the spotlight and at the expense of the victims, and an unspoken prohibition against criticism and dissent.

Online, people are complaining that Kolpakov's resignation marks the demise of common sense. They might be right – but if preserving common sense means maintaining an unjust status quo, is its demise really that bad?

The members of Russia's media clique are right about one thing, however: The rhetoric on this subject has changed irreversibly such that Meduza's readers and the members of wider society will no longer agree to live by the old rules. And this gap will continue to widen.

Bella Rapoport is a Russian columnist and LGBT rights activist. The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the editorial position of The Moscow Times.

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