

Yegor Zhukov Wants to Be Russia's President One Day

The figurehead of the crackdown on Moscow's summer protests says he's just getting started.

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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Yegor Zhukov, center, outside a Moscow court after he was freed last week, with his press secretary, right. **Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency**

Yegor Zhukov was tired of giving interviews. So instead of using the main entrance to an event in his honor, where a television crew was waiting for him, he slipped past a security guard and headed for a side door. He didn't go unnoticed.

"Please, young man, follow the rules," the guard ordered, running after him.

Zhukov, a 21-year-old politics student and popular libertarian YouTube blogger, doesn't particularly like rules. Or rather, he explains, he doesn't mind rules in principle, it's just that he grew up in a country with a big government that uses them to infringe on the rights of its

citizens.

Wanting that to change is why he made a bold declaration last week, a day after a Moscow court had bowed to public pressure and released him on a suspended sentence of three years under the condition that he not use the internet.

“I want to be the president of the country,” he said in an [appearance](#) on the independent Dozhd television channel.

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Although Zhukov has long criticized the Russian government on his blog, his recent experience with the country's legal system was his first close encounter with what he sees as a repressive regime.

In August, at the height of the protests in Moscow against a decision by election commission officials to bar opposition politicians from running in the city's local parliament elections, police arrested him along with a couple of dozen others on charges of fomenting mass unrest.

They got the wrong guy. In court, prosecutors showed a video of a young man during a rally gesturing for people to walk toward a group of riot police. Journalists, however, later turned up another video showing that it was a case of mistaken identity. Despite the blunder, the authorities stood steadfast behind their decision.

The absurdity of the case made Zhukov the opposition's figurehead of the repressive nature of the authorities' crackdown on the protests. His star rose further because of his stoic posture in the face of prosecution.

“I don't know if I will be free,” he told a judge during a court appearance, “but Russia definitely will.”

As a public outcry against the crackdown gathered steam, the authorities in September released a handful of the prisoners. But while Zhukov's charges were dropped, prosecutors now brandished a new accusation: that he had been hostile to the government in his YouTube videos and was hence guilty of extremism, a charge that carries up to five years in prison.

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Like many opposition activists of his generation, Zhukov's political wake up came in March 2017, when Russia's most prominent opposition critic Alexei Navalny released a [YouTube video](#) alleging corruption by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, sparking a series of protests that spring. In June of that year, Zhukov launched his blog.

But while Navalny triggered Zhukov's awakening, the young activist has chosen the ideological path of libertarianism, a political philosophy emphasizing individual autonomy. In nearly all of his videos — in which he mostly criticizes President Vladimir Putin's administration — the Gadsden flag, a symbol of the American revolution adopted by libertarians, hangs on a wall behind him, blaring the words: “Don't tread on me.”

If his politics aren't for all, his final words to a judge before sentencing last week nonetheless struck a chord with a wide audience.

“Your honor, the darker my future, the wider I smile toward it,” he said in a speech, [translated](#) into English by a number of publications including The New Yorker, that went viral in the United States.

On Wednesday evening, Zhukov, his parents, others who had been arrested and then released for their roles in the summer's protests and activists of varying political persuasions gathered in the newsroom of the independent Novaya Gazeta newspaper in central Moscow to watch a [documentary film](#) the outlet had produced on the summer and the fallout.

Zhukov sat in the front row, erupting into laughter along with others in the room, their tribulations now behind them, as they watched scenes of Russian riot police clad in protective armor drag teenagers off to police wagons. Afterwards, Zhukov and one of his lawyers split off with several activists who wanted his ear over what he will do now that he is all but free.

The activists told him there are other cases that are not getting enough attention. Namely, that of Novoye Velichiye, or the New Greatness — a chat group of mostly young people that was infiltrated by a Federal Security Service (FSB) officer. The authorities claim the group was extremist; its defenders say the case is fabricated.

By the end of the evening, Zhukov was convinced he had to speak out about the case. “This is something that has directly affected me too,” he said once he had sat down for an interview with The Moscow Times.

How will he do it? Legally speaking, his lawyers have told him, he can do it through his [blog](#), which now has more than 170,000 followers — having gained 70,000 since his August arrest — as long as he passes administrative control over it to someone else.

Beyond continuing with the blog, he said, he plans to finish his university degree by next summer. He's also going to host a talk show on the liberal Ekho Moskvyy radio station and write for Novaya Gazeta.

“These are other ways I see to keep spreading my ideas,” he said. “That's my goal right now: for the focus not to be on me, but on the ideas.”

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His ideas have raised eyebrows. Critics have pointed to his support of Jordan Peterson, a Canadian thinker who has been [described](#) as a purveyor of “fascist mysticism.” They have also noted one video from January of this year [titled](#) “Feminism Is Dangerous,” in which Zhukov, seated behind a desk with a red Make America Great Again cap on it, tells his audience: “Today the nutcases are lefties and particularly left-wing feminists.”

During the Dozhd interview, Zhukov defended his views, comparing the idea of feminism to the Soviet notion of collective identities. This sparked a new round of criticism among Russian liberals.

Asked if he regretted his comments, Zhukov nodded, but said the problem was how he had explained himself.

“It taught me that I need to carefully express my views,” he said. “At the end of the day, I want the same thing as Russian feminists. For transgender people’s rights to be respected, for same-sex marriage to be legal, for there to be a law against domestic violence. I just don’t believe in classifying people according to collective identities.”

Throughout the interview, Zhukov’s press secretary Stanislav Toporkov, 18, sat beside him, correcting every now and then. He’s just one member of Zhukov’s growing team, which currently has five other members.

But the team is still deciding how it’s going to function — as an organized party or a more organic political movement. What it does know, Zhukov said, is that 2021 and 2024 — when State Duma and presidential elections will take place — are essential years for their future.

“We are still figuring it all out,” Zhukov said. “The idea for now is to say: stay tuned.”

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