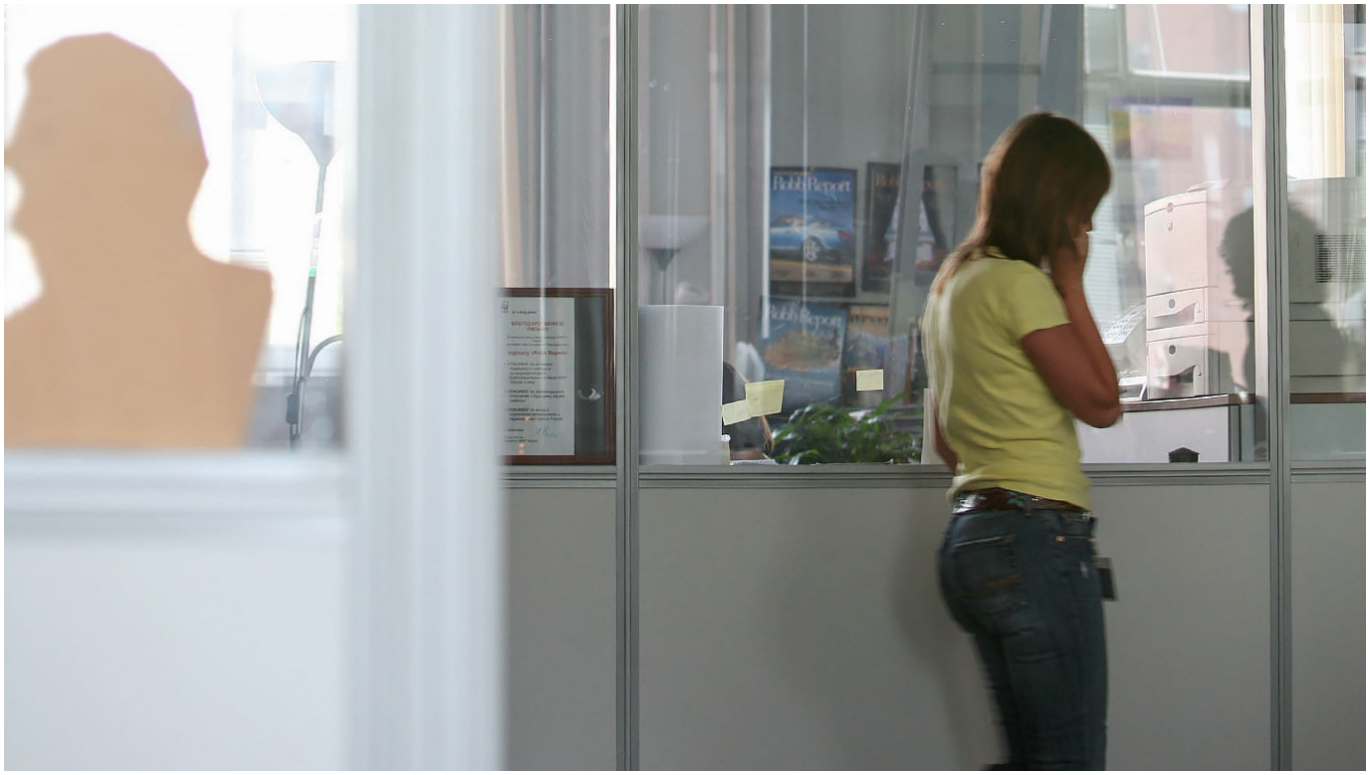
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Wave of Sexual Harassment Claims Is Rocking Russia's Independent Media

Novaya Gazeta has blazed a trail by instituting a sexual harassment policy after taking internal accusations of misconduct seriously. Some independent outlets are following suit.

By Evan Gershkovich

July 23, 2020



Last week, Novaya Gazeta circulated its new sexual harassment regulations among two dozen other media organizations. **Georgy Shpikalov / TASS**

Читайте русскую версию здесь.

As her shift at Russia's investigative Novaya Gazeta newspaper was coming to an end on a late Monday afternoon last January, Elizaveta Kirpanova stopped by a senior reporter's office to catch up.

Kirpanova, a 23-year-old reporter who had just completed her first year at the respected

paper, was working on a topic her elder colleague knew well, and she figured she could ask for some pointers.

Soon, though, the discussion turned to a story that was on everyone's minds at the time: the recent resignation of the Meduza news website's chief editor Ivan Kolpakov after he groped a colleague's wife at a staff party.

Resulting in a public figure's resignation over claims of sexual misconduct, the case became Russia's first #MeToo moment. It also riled the country's small community of independent journalists, who mostly fell on different sides of a generational divide. The young guard felt it was appropriate Kolpakov had left his post; veterans either thought the punishment was too harsh, or that what he had done was not abuse.

Kirpanova remembers speaking out sharply against Kolpakov's actions. As she stood to leave, the senior reporter asked if he could give her a hug to clear the tension.

"I hugged him for a second and started to pull back, but he's holding me," Kirpanova recalled in an interview last week. "So I push him away and say, jokingly, 'Now *you* are starting to harass *me*.'"

Her colleague shut the office door and grabbed Kirpanova's face with both hands.

"Then he says, 'This is what harassment is' and kisses me on the lips," Kirpanova recounted. "After that I don't really remember what happened. I ran out into the corridor and yelled something vulgar. My heart was beating really fast. I gathered my things and left the newsroom."

Related article: Russian Opposition Media Editor Quits Amid Wave of Harassment Claims

Eighteen months later, Kirpanova is sharing her story publicly for the first time. She decided to come forward after dozens of young women and men began airing their stories of harassment — first in a trickle, then a flood — on social media last week about men who work or used to work in Russian independent media.

If Kolpakov's resignation was Russia's first #MeToo moment, last week's wave of accusations signaled the arrival of the movement in the country in full force, resulting in three men leaving their jobs.

In the aftermath, many independent journalists who spoke to The Moscow Times over the past week stressed that the stories are coming out of Russia's independent media circles precisely because these are the people who have been thinking and talking about the issue since the advent of #MeToo.

The stories have since prompted soul-searching inside independent newsrooms over what, if anything, needs to change. In their wake, Novaya Gazeta on July 14 announced that, already back in March, it had created a new policy to manage sexual harassment complaints. The paper last week sent the document to two dozen other newsrooms that have since been deciding whether or not to follow suit.

Yet what Novaya Gazeta did not say publicly was that the policy was prompted by several cases of harassment within the paper's own walls, the details of which have not been previously reported. Nor did the paper say that, although in the end a large majority of its newsroom voted in favor of the new policy, it was the paper's younger journalists — most of whom were women — who pushed the new policy through against initial resistance from the paper's older guard.

Clash of generations

Last January, as Kirpanova processed what had happened, she turned to her immediate supervisor for advice. The supervisor suggested she bring it up with the paper's two deputy chief editors.

"They asked me if I wanted him fired, and I said no," Kirpanova said. "I am not a backer of punitive measures. I am more for educational measures."

The deputy chief editors spoke with the correspondent and told Kirpanova that he had assured them nothing like that would happen again. Although Kirpanova "would shoot past him like a bullet" whenever she saw him, the issue was put to rest for nearly a year.

After Novaya Gazeta's holiday party in late December 2019, however, a small group of mostly young colleagues, including Kirpanova, gathered in the office after returning from a nearby bar. The paper's longtime chief editor Dmitry Muratov, who had recently returned to the post after a two-year absence, joined them.

The conversation soon turned to feminism and workplace harassment, and the younger colleagues present recalled that Muratov, 58, was not convinced that Novaya Gazeta had such problems.

Kirpanova shared her story. Others opened up too.

"I heard what turned out to be news to me, and in my view quite serious," Muratov told The Moscow Times. "People did not feel safe."

During the period he was away from the newsroom, Muratov said about two dozen new journalists had joined a staff that had worked at the paper for 15 to 20 years.

"This is a new generation with a different understanding of their boundaries," Muratov said. "I took it not as a clash between an aggressor and a victim, but a clash of generations."

By the end of the evening, Muratov had authorized the younger staff to come up with a policy on sexual harassment. The group invited others in the newsroom to join them. According to one of the group's members, Lilit Sarkisyan, 21, in the end a dozen young people signed on: 11 women and one man.

Changing views

The generational divide in Russia over the question of sexual harassment was especially visible during last week's wave of accusations on social media, triggered after Violeta Er, a 25-year-old hairdresser, shared the story of her experience of an abusive relationship on Twitter

on July 12.

Soon, the floodgates opened and the stories — ranging from emotional abuse to rape — poured in. The accusations concerned men, most of whom worked, or had previously worked, in Russia's independent media outlets, and were told by people who mostly ran in the tight-knit social circle.

"These stories were happening here in parallel to the conversation starting around #MeToo, but no one did anything about them," said Valentina Dekhtyarenko, 23, who works for exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia pro-democracy movement and shared over 20 allegations on her Twitter page. "There was a huge silence that had been growing over the years and it finally ended."

Not everyone took the stories seriously.

"When will these sluts calm down already?" Ksenia Larina, a 57-year-old journalist at the liberal-leaning Ekho Moskvy radio station, wrote on Twitter. "How much longer are they going to wave their panties around?"

A similar dynamic had been visible inside Novaya Gazeta when the working group tasked with developing the sexual harassment policy began introducing first drafts to the newsroom in February, according to Muratov and younger staffers.

Resistance to introducing rules ranged from views that sexual harassment did not exist in the newsroom, to concerns that people would need permission to express affection, to the view — also shared by some older women staffers — that women should just say no and stand up for themselves.

"In my case, I didn't even have the time to react," Kirpanova said. "It all happened so fast."

"Ideally," she added, "you would ask for permission each time, yes."

To the group's surprise, the regulations — which Novaya Gazeta showed The Moscow Times — ended up passing in March by a wide margin. Members credited a lecture by Anna Rivina, director of the women's rights organization Nasiliyu.net ("No to Violence") Center, whom they invited to the newsroom before the vote.

Taking as their goal guaranteeing a "safe working atmosphere," the regulations define sexual harassment as "attention of a sexual nature, including not only sexual coercion, but also touching without consent, lustful gestures and comments about appearance with a sexual connotation, which put a person in an awkward or humiliating position."

The document also enshrines the formation of an "ethical committee" that will review claims of sexual harassment — or psychological abuse — within 21 days of the complaints being submitted.

Consisting of five people, the committee includes the paper's ombudsman and four people elected every two years — two women and two men, each set containing one member 34 or younger, the other over 34. The paper's chief editor, director and anyone who was previously seen as violating the regulations are barred from balloting.

Test for society

As a result of last week's wave of complaints, a top editor and a photographer of the MBKh Media news website resigned, while Russia's biggest state-owned bank Sberbank opened an investigation into two of its employees, both of whom had also formerly worked in independent media outlets. One of the two has since resigned.

"These cases are the tip of the iceberg," said Rivina of Nasiliyu.net, noting that the response to the complaints represents a sea change in Russian society.

"What is happening in the so-called liberal crowd proves that this is everywhere," she added. "This is a very important test for all of society."

In conversations with independent journalists, many emphasized that, in a country where press freedom is under threat and few independent media outlets are left, there is a feeling that you don't go after your own. Some expressed concerns that this article would feed the fire for the Kremlin's propagandists, who have already published a series of hit pieces about bad behavior among Russia's opposition.

Many also said that "family" culture has also cultivated the idea in their workplaces that everything can be mediated without rules.

Related article: Russia's Top University Ignores 'Commonplace' Sexual Harassment Amid Controversy

Such was the case at the independent Dozhd television channel, two men who accused one of the channel's most prominent hosts, Pavel Lobkov, 53, of harassment, told The Moscow Times. They were two of three men who first posted their allegations on Twitter.

In an interview on Ekho Moskvy last week, Dozhd chief editor Tikhon Dzyadko apologized for Lobkov's actions and announced the host would be taking a one-week long vacation. For his part, Lobkov apologized in a Facebook post, explaining that he had grown up in a time "when we considered this harassment a cute game in which the participants know their roles and no one goes beyond certain boundaries that were established in the process of communication."

"Everyone joked about it. 'Oh, it's just Pasha,'" said one of the men, who recently left the channel, using a diminutive for Pavel.

The young man described an open culture of Lobkov groping young men and joking with them about sex in an open-plan newsroom, as colleagues, including senior staff, looked on. He accused Lobkov of once going so far as sticking his hand up his shirt while kissing his neck and whispering about sex in his ear — in full view of everyone present.

At the time, the young man didn't complain.

"There were never any instruments for how to complain about something like this," he said. "There is no internal ethics code."

Some older journalists came to Lobkov's defense, noting that he does not hold the rank of

senior editor and did not have the power to fire or promote the young journalists at the channel.

For the two men, however, the problem did not just lie in his job title.

"He doesn't have legal power, but he is the face of the channel," the young man said. "It's impossible to complain about him in that environment."

For Alexander Skrylnikov, 25, the situation meant leaving the channel after a four-month internship came to an end in 2014 rather than staying on in a staff position, which had been informally offered to him when he first started.

"I just figured it would be better to leave than stick around and keep dealing with that," said Skrylnikov, who now works at MBKh Media, explaining that Lobkov would often kiss his neck or grope him in full view of everyone. Skrylnikov never made a formal complaint.

"What can you do if you don't even understand your rights?" he said.

Comrades' court

Last week, Novaya Gazeta sent its new regulations to Syndicate 100, an association of independent outlets that includes Dozhd, Ekho Moskvy and Meduza, among others.

Asked if Dozhd would be implementing a version of the regulations, chief editor Dzyadko said: "If Dozhd ever develops regulations, it will be done inside the newsroom." The channel's general director Natalya Sindeyeva, meanwhile, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of Ekho Moskvy, who himself was recently accused of harassment, likewise did not respond to multiple requests for comment on whether the radio station is considering instituting a sexual harassment policy in light of recent events.

Other outlets, however, are following Novaya Gazeta's example — at least to a degree.

Galina Timchenko, CEO of Meduza who drew criticism when she reinstated chief editor Kolpakov less than six months after his resignation, told The Moscow Times that the outlet was already planning a similar system, also with an elected ethics committee. She said the plan is for the new regulations to be in force by mid-September.

At MBKh Media, which was rocked by accusations last week but is not part of Syndicate 100, chief editor Veronika Kutsyllo rejected the creation of an ethics committee, saying it reminded her of the "Comrades' court of Soviet times."

But she added: "Rules of relations have been approved, with which all employees will be familiarized in the near future."

All of these outlets, as well as Novaya Gazeta, were instrumental in a 2018 campaign to boycott State Duma lawmaker Leonid Slutsky, who was accused of sexually harassing at least five female journalists. A parliamentary ethics commission dismissed the claims and Slutsky continues to serve in Russia's parliament.

At Novaya Gazeta, one editor is happy the regulations were developed. Asking to remain anonymous, she told The Moscow Times that the same man who harassed Kirpanova had also targeted her.

Like in Kirpanova's case, the editor went into the male correspondent's office with a work question. Meduza editor Kolpakov's case had only just made the news, and so the story naturally came up in conservation.

As the editor turned to leave, the correspondent laughed at her "youthful progressiveness" and slapped her backside, she recalled this week.

The editor said she held her ground and asked the correspondent if he was worried about what could happen if she reported him. According to the editor, he replied: "I have a doctor's note saying I'm impotent, so no one will believe you anyway."

The editor recalled cursing at him, threatening him with serious consequences, and said the correspondent seemed to take her seriously at that point.

"Not all girls in such a situation can stand up for themselves," she said. "And I might not have been able to if he were my boss or a person who I would treat with special reverence."

Fits and starts

Katerina Fomina, 28, said she wished harassment had been taken more seriously when she worked at Novaya Gazeta. She left the paper officially in 2018 after six years, partly over a complaint of sexual misconduct that she said was never resolved.

The incident happened in late November 2017, just six weeks after The New York Times broke the story about Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual misconduct. Fomina was in her editor's office, sitting on a chair with her legs curled up under her, her backside hanging off the side, as she waited for the editor to read a draft of a story.

That's when Leonid Nikitinsky, a 66-year-old columnist at the paper and a member of the Presidential Human Rights Council, opened the door, walked up to her and spanked her.

"He said, 'You were sitting so nicely I couldn't just walk by,'" Fomina recalled last week.

When reached by phone early Tuesday evening, Nikitinsky confirmed the story.

"Yes, I spanked her on her bottom as a joke, because that was very accepted in the years when I grew up," he said. "I apologized to her 150 times. I said, 'I didn't mean anything by it, when I was young, this was seen as normal.' Why she became upset with me, I don't understand."

Related article: Russian Women Rally Behind Feminist 'Political Prisoner'

Asked if his opinion on harassment had changed in the three years since, Nikitinsky said, "No, because I'm sorry, but I am nearly 70," adding: "I just understand now that young people and women are different and I no longer do these things."

Muratov, who was the chief editor at the time, expressed deep regret at Fomina's departure, saying that the situation had informed his view of the need for regulations when the subject came up again this winter.

But while Muratov called Nikitinsky's actions "totally inappropriate behavior," he rejected the suggestion that they could be viewed as harassment, pointing to the fact that Fomina was not Nikitinsky's subordinate in the newsroom structure.

For Fomina, however, the act itself was an expression of hierarchy, a gesture that showed her that she was just "a little girl in this newspaper, not an experienced journalist."

At the time, discussions about harassment had only just begun in Russia, and Fomina recalled that even her friends assured her that Nikitinsky was old and wouldn't get an erection.

"It's this idea that it has to be about sex, not about how the victim feels," she said.

"If my case had been seen as harassment back then," Fomina added, "perhaps these other cases wouldn't have happened."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/23/a-wave-of-sexual-harassment-claims-is-rocking-russias-independent-media-a70949