



Navalny launched the RosPil website to highlight Russian government corruption. Some regard him as a possible future president, but liberals are wary of his nationalist views

# SEEING RED

The anti-Putin, anti-corruption movement is gathering pace in Moscow, and Alexei Navalny is leading the way. Yet he's no liberal, describing militants as 'cockroaches' and preaching to nationalists. Mark Franchetti meets the unlikely revolutionaries behind the protests

PORTRAIT BY YURI KOZYREV



**F**ew scenes sum up the nature of power in Russia better than the daily spectacle under my kitchen window on Moscow's Kutuzovsky Prospekt, a sprawling 10-lane artery used by some half a million motorists a day. The flow is relentless, the noise deafening. Suddenly it stops and the air fills with eerie silence. With military precision, police clear the entire highway and block off all access routes. The road is deserted, frozen in time. Everyone waits.

Then, on the horizon, flashing blue lights and wailing sirens fill the road. A motorcade appears. Travelling at speeds of up to 100 miles an hour, an armoured black Mercedes limousine flashes by as traffic wardens salute from the roadside. The vehicle is flanked by police cars and four-wheel drives crammed with armed guards. Inside the limousine, seated comfortably behind drawn curtains, is Russia's strongman, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. A stretch of more than 20 miles is cleared in this fashion to allow him to pass, like a tsar.

I have watched the scene — which also takes place for President Dmitry Medvedev — thousands of times, but still find it compelling. It is a shameless display of brazen power, a daily reminder of the state's contempt for its people. The motorcade causes massive traffic jams, yet people still wait patiently; their obsequiousness before authority is deep-rooted.

Some three months ago came a watershed moment: for the first time I heard a couple of motorists honk in anger as they waited in traffic for Putin. Once unfathomable, the new trend is quickly catching on and, remarkably, this motorcade is now routinely greeted by a cacophony of horns sounded in protest. Russian politics has not been this interesting in years.

As Putin prepares to reclaim his old position as president in elections next month, 12 years after he first acquired the top job, there is a whiff of rebellion in the air. After parliamentary elections in December were marred by widespread ballot-rigging to shore up Putin's ruling party, more than 200,000 people — mainly educated, middle-class and computer-savvy Muscovites protesting for the first time — took to the streets to vent their anger. Previously, opposition protests under Putin would attract only a few hundred people, who were routinely beaten or detained by police.



For the first time, arguably, in the country's troubled recent history, people who are neither political dissidents nor human-rights campaigners are taking on a corrupt and authoritarian state. "This is merely the beginning of something that will only grow and grow. It's impossible to stop, crush or stifle because it's the wind of change," Pioty Shkumatov, 32, tells me.

A specialist in internet marketing who had never dreamt of taking a public stand, Shkumatov can pinpoint the exact moment he was seized by a sense of civic duty. On a grey spring day in April 2010, the father of two was hit on a zebra crossing by a car that ignored a red light. The luxury sedan was fitted with a *migalka*, the flashing blue light granted to all Russian high-ranking state officials, Kremlin and government apparatchiks.

"I couldn't find a single witness willing to testify," Shkumatov recalls. "They were afraid, or felt it was a waste of time. I realised that if I had been badly hurt or killed, the police would have claimed that I'd crossed with a green light



and was drunk. My whole outlook on life changed within 30 seconds that day." Shkumatov has since become one of the leading figures in the Society of Blue Buckets, a citizens' group whose members drive with children's blue sand buckets fixed to their car roofs to imitate the *migalka*. Founded less than two years ago, the group is lobbying for all state officials to be stripped of their flashing blue lights.

The movement, which is mostly active in Moscow and St Petersburg, claims to have



Left and below:  
Muscovites protest  
against migalka – the  
flashing lights used by  
government officials to  
speed past other traffic –  
using children’s blue sand  
buckets and balloons

cars. The web is brimming with footage of activists standing up to the notoriously corrupt and unpopular traffic police. “I used to get pulled over 10 times a day when I first fixed a blue bucket to my car roof, but now the traffic police have got used to us,” says Shkumatov. His fierce commitment has led him to give up his job, has provoked physical threats and even contributed to the break-up of his marriage, as his wife does not share his loss-making altruism. “I’m doing my bit to make my country more civilised. The *migalka* is a symbol of the abuse of power, arrogance and impunity of Russian state officials. It used to be inconceivable to block a *migalka*’s path. Now it’s commonplace,” he says.

In a sign of changing times, Alexander Konovalov, the Russian justice minister, recently gave up his car’s flashing blue light.

The Blue Buckets are typical of the budding citizens’ movements, which are springing up across Russia. They are difficult to stifle because they are amorphous and almost exclusively web-based, often operating without an office that the authorities can shut down.

## In a sign of changing times, Russia’s justice minister gave up his blue light

at the offices of the RosPil website he launched to expose high-level corruption – a deadly occupation that has already claimed the lives of several Russian investigative journalists.

Dressed in jeans and a striped blue shirt, he is tweeting and watching the latest popular political videos on YouTube when I find him, bent over a MacBook and an iPhone – the weapons of choice of Russia’s web warriors. He is only 35 and supremely self-assured.

“People used to write to the police to report corruption and abuse of power, and were simply ignored,” says Navalny. “Now with the web and mobile phone cameras, there’s the technology and the platform for anybody to expose such things. It costs nothing, it’s immediate and reaches millions.”

**D**escribed by some as the most interesting political figure to have emerged in Putin’s Russia, Navalny has become the unofficial face of the post-election street-protest movement. More than 1m people read his blog every month. Charismatic, highly articulate and



40,000 supporters and 3,000 active members. The latter drive at all times with blue buckets attached to their roofs, and a video camera behind their windcreens to catch *migalka* vehicles driving dangerously. The footage is then posted on YouTube and offending state bureaucrats are named and shamed.

Shkumatov and other die-hard activists also refuse to give way to *migalka* cars, a risky undertaking in Russia, where such vehicles are often shadowed by armed bodyguards in chase



Now they have found a new hero: Alexei Navalny, Russia’s most famous anti-corruption activist. Shkumatov’s eyes light up as he tells me matter-of-factly that in three years, Navalny, not Putin, will be the country’s president. The claim, in my view, is pure fantasy, but it gives a measure of the impact Navalny is having on his fellow web users.

Tall, blue-eyed and tanned after a new year holiday in Mexico with his wife, Yulia, and two children, Navalny greets me with a broad smile

known for his sardonic wit, the lawyer – who was jailed for two weeks after being arrested at an opposition rally in December – was the first to describe Putin’s ruling United Russia as the “party of crooks and thieves”, now a widely used term of derision.

“If these crooks and thieves keep cheating us, we will take what is ours,” the activist shouted with fiery aplomb from a stage before nearly 100,000 demonstrators on Christmas Eve. “We have enough people here to take the Kremlin right now. But we are peaceful people and we won’t do that – yet.”

With only four young employees tapping away on laptops in a bare, two-room office on the corner of a Moscow side street, RosPil may not look like a game changer, but its methods and results are both new and striking. Launched a year ago, the site identifies and investigates suspicious public state tenders that have been inflated by corrupt officials – “a sort of people’s sheriff”, as Navalny puts it. With so few ➡➡➡

staff, it does this through crowdsourcing — internet jargon for outsourcing tasks to an online community. Dubious contracts are exposed and reported to the authorities.

Navalny estimates that £800m worth of such tenders were cancelled as a result of RosPil (named after the Russian word *pilit*, meaning “to saw off” or “misappropriate”), which he launched in part after stumbling across an interior-ministry tender for two gold-plated double beds destined for a state guesthouse.

The site is entirely funded by anonymous donations from ordinary Russians — more than 30,000 people so far — a considerable achievement in a country of hardened sceptics. “I’m motivated by a sense of utter fury and by the feeling that these state crooks are stealing from me and my children,” says Navalny, who was raised in closed Soviet military towns where his father, a Red Army officer, served.

“Russia, with its wealth of oil, gas and minerals, is swimming in money, but most of it is being siphoned off by thieving bureaucrats. We should live infinitely better. Instead, everything is collapsing. The overwhelming majority of Russians agree with me. They’ve had it with this state-sponsored kleptocracy.”

Corruption has reached such levels in Russia that the local edition of the men’s magazine *Esquire* — which recently put Navalny on its cover — calculated that a road built at the site of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics cost so much that it might as well have been paved with 9in of foie gras, or 3½in of Louis Vuitton bags.

Navalny cleverly bought tiny stakes in large state corporations, giving himself a platform to demand greater transparency from them. He has filed suits against some of Russia’s most powerful state corporations — which are mostly headed by Putin cronies — to gain greater access to their secretive financial dealings.

“I’m not an especially aggressive person, but these corrupt bureaucrats must be jailed and this rotten system broken,” he says. “If the only way is to storm the Kremlin, then so be it.” On another occasion, he said: “Revolution is unavoidable.”

Prosecutors last year reopened an obscure probe against him on suspicion that he abused his position when working for a regional governor by leading a local timber company into an unprofitable business deal. Navalny insists this is just an attempt to put psychological pressure on him. The Kremlin calls him a US government stooge and the internet is awash

with scurrilous claims about him — for example, that he’s in the pay of anti-Kremlin oligarchs or that his site investigates business contracts not as a result of crowdsourcing, but secretly takes money from rival business factions. Some of the claims are pitiful: he laughs as he tells me that he and his family were harassed at the airport on their return from Mexico by a pro-Kremlin TV camera crew, demanding to know why they had flown in from New York, and whether his wife had an American passport. More sinisterly, he is plagued at home by anonymous callers who ring in the middle of the night to shout abuse, but he has so far resisted pleas from friends and supporters to hire bodyguards.

**S**ome see Navalny, who lives in a modest flat in a Moscow bedroom suburb, as a future president, but others are highly suspicious of his populist views. The gutsy activist, who spent time as a fellow at Yale University, is no western-leaning liberal, but a fiery nationalist whose harsh anti-immigration stance alarms many Russian democrats.

Navalny has called for a curb on immigration and an end to generous Kremlin subsidies to the Caucasus, a region plagued by violence, poverty and Islamic militancy. Indeed, most Russians would agree with him. He was expelled from a liberal party, has spoken at rallies attended by neo-Nazis and skinheads, and starred in a tongue-in-cheek video calling for gun control laws to be relaxed, in which he compared dark-skinned Caucasus terrorists to cockroaches. While cockroaches can be killed with a slipper, a smiling Navalny says in the video, in the case of humans, “I recommend a pistol”.

## ‘If the only way is to storm the Kremlin, then so be it’

The dashing lawyer was amused when I asked him about this video, instantly finding it on the net. He smiled a mischievous grin as we watched it together and I pressed him further. He forcefully insisted that it was meant to be humorous and strictly in favour of less stringent gun laws, and not in any way against non-white non-Russians. He seemed sincere, but that is not how many in Russia would read it. In a country where racism against migrants runs high, many

criticise the lawyer’s populism as dangerous and accuse him of stoking ethnic tensions.

No doubt the brash demagoguery could, as one critic put it, “let out of the bottle the genie of Russia’s vicious nationalism. Things could turn very nasty once you go down that road”.

A close friend of Navalny’s, who insists he poses no danger to the country’s fragile ethnic balance, said his views are in part shaped by the fact that he commutes every day from a far-flung district popular with illegal immigrants, where he lives with his family.

“In contrast to mainstream liberal opposition politicians who live in Moscow’s city centre, Alexei sees every day how his pretty blonde wife doesn’t feel entirely safe when she walks home.”

For all the pressure to soften the rhetoric, Navalny was unapologetic when I challenged him about his more extreme views. “I’ve been told all would be fine if, instead of a nationalist, I labelled myself as a patriot,” he said. “Maybe, but I don’t have a problem being described as a nationalist. These are real problems that concern millions of Russians. All I’m doing is talking about them rather than sticking my head in the sand like others do, because they want to be politically correct. There are a lot of nationalists in Russia who feel

disenfranchised. I’m not afraid of talking to them. You can’t pretend they don’t exist and ignore them.”

Such controversial views can be popular in Russia, where to be labelled a democrat is tantamount to political suicide, as millions of voters associate the term with the chaos and misery that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many Russians refer to *demokratia*, or democracy, as *dermokratia*, or shit-ocracy.





**Above: the Russian socialite Ksenia Sobchak and Navalny at a protest against alleged vote-rigging in December's elections. Left: at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007**

There are now two Russias: the strictly sanitised one portrayed on the evening state news, which shapes the views of older, Soviet generations, and the stark one on the web, where younger Russians surf a world of uncensored news and irreverent opinion. When Medvedev — who, unlike Putin, is internet savvy and an iPad fan — used twitter to congratulate supporters of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party for narrowly winning the rigged parliamentary elections, his

account was instantly deluged with insults. Russia is now the country with the most internet users in Europe: 50m. Most people still get their news from television, but once the citizens of the web catch up, the shift will have a seismic impact in a nation where public opinion has been all too easily manipulated or ignored.

The recent massive anti-Kremlin demonstrations were organised in a matter of only a few days, primarily through social-networking sites. “It was when the Kremlin saw the numbers on the web of those vowing to attend swell into the tens of thousands that permission was granted for the demos, and police violence ruled out,” said a former Putin aide. “The calculus is simple: as long as it’s two or three policemen for each protester, bring out the rubber batons. One policeman for each protester, stand down.”

Without social-networking sites, groups such as the Blue Buckets could not exist. But these are mere tools. Behind the growth in civil protest is a generational change, as Shkumatov points out. “Russians who grew up in Soviet

times are prone to allowing those in power to step all over them. Younger generations are different,” he says. “They are less cowed, freer and markedly less deferential.”

Attempts to fight the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of the Russian state seemed futile until, in a landmark case, Alexei Kozlov and his wife, Olga Romanova, took it on. Kozlov, a businessman in his early thirties, was determined to be worth \$100m by the age of 40; by 50, he wanted to be a billionaire. In 2008 he lived in a mansion in Moscow’s equivalent of Beverly Hills, skied in St Moritz, and when in Paris stayed only at the luxury Hôtel de Crillon.

As Romanova, a well-known journalist, puts it, her husband was the sort of person who would have a tantrum in a hotel “because of the fluffiness of the towels”. “In those days, money was more important for me than relationships,” he tells me bluntly in a Moscow restaurant.

But the entrepreneur fell out with his business partner, a controversial and powerful senator with a reputation for ruthlessness. In July 2008 Kozlov was arrested, charged with fraud and locked up in Moscow’s most infamous remand jail, sharing an overcrowded cell with rapists and murderers.

“The tragic truth is that in most cases it’s cheaper and easier to pay a bribe to bent law-enforcement officers to have a business rival jailed on trumped-up charges, than to turn to lawyers,” says Kozlov. “If you have the money and the connections, having a case fabricated poses little problem.”

At first, Kozlov sought to play by the system’s unwritten rules. Shortly after his arrest, he had his wife deliver a \$1.5m (£952,000) cash bribe to a senior Interior Ministry official who had promised to have him released on bail. Instead the businessman was kept behind bars, put on trial, sentenced to eight years and locked away in a penal colony beyond the Ural mountains.

“The hardest thing was the crushing feeling of utter powerlessness,” recalls Kozlov. “You are an able-bodied man, but suddenly you can do nothing, you are entirely at the mercy of others who can do anything they want with you, literally. It was paralyzing. What saved me in jail was that a powerful underworld boss took pity on me and protected me.”

There is no shortage of such tales in Russia. What happened next was more unusual. Kozlov and Romanova went on the offensive, filing appeal after appeal and challenging his sentence at every turn. Romanova publicised the ➤➤➤

Alexei Kozlov, who was released from prison after the Supreme Court quashed his conviction, and his wife, Olga Romanova



case and gathered evidence to show that it had been fabricated. She also admitted paying the bribe and reported the corrupt police official (three years later he is still in his post). Kozlov, meanwhile, wrote a popular and incisive blog about prison life. Fortunately for him, the senator lost his seat and soon left the country over a bitter custody dispute with his former wife. Then, last September, the unthinkable happened; Russia's Supreme Court overturned Kozlov's sentence, conceding that some of the evidence had been fabricated, and the businessman was released after more than three years in jail.

Now a profoundly changed man, Kozlov says that prison turned his values upside down. He is going back into business, but also wants to start a group to provide support and publicity to victims of trumped-up cases, and to lobby for changes in the criminal code to put an end to the abuse.

Romanova, who had to pay a bribe to the priest of the Moscow remand jail to secure the first meeting with her husband, six months after his arrest, leads *Rus Sidyaschaya* (Russia Behind Bars). The citizens' help group is composed of relatives of prison inmates, or people who have served time, who, in Romanova's words, "are lost in an unjust system".

"I'm not seeking revenge," says Kozlov, 37. "I'm becoming involved because a signal must be sent. Civil society is vital because I feel we can change things. The law is not the problem, it's the total lack of accountability. If I do my bit, others will follow my example and join in to improve things.

"People like those who had me jailed must be stopped. I was lucky, but countless others are not. You can give up and leave Russia or stay and try to make it a better, more civilised place. I chose to stay."

**T**he dawning civic consciousness has attracted some surprising converts, including Ksenia Sobchak, Russia's most famous It girl, a glamorous blonde who has enjoyed a string of wealthy boyfriends and is both celebrated and despised as a symbol of Moscow's brash capitalism. A Slavic Paris Hilton, she has posed for men's magazines and dismayed conservatives with a popular reality TV show in which contestants cavort with each other.

## 'People like those who had me jailed must be stopped. I was lucky'

In one reality show dedicated to her lifestyle — in which she posed in her bed and extolled the virtues of masturbating in the bathtub — cameras followed her on trips to luxury designer shops and beauty salons. Crucially, she is the daughter of the late Anatoly Sobchak, who was Putin's boss and political mentor when he was the liberal-minded mayor of St Petersburg in the early 1990s. Even now, Russia's strongman retains a soft spot for Sobchak and speaks of him fondly. The former mayor's family also owes Putin a heavy debt of gratitude — he stood firmly by Sobchak when he fell out of favour with the Kremlin and had to flee Russia to escape prosecution. Hence the significance of the moment on Christmas Eve when Ksenia, 30, chose to address 100,000 protesters from the same stage as Navalny and other Kremlin critics, an unexpected turn that was met with considerable jeering from the crowd.

"It was important for me to finally take a stand," Sobchak told me over mint tea at her restaurant, popular with Moscow's moneyed elites. She is dressed in black, perfectly manicured and wearing a diamond-encrusted cross around her neck. "I'd been feeling discontented for some time, but I was torn between my eternal gratitude towards Putin as a human being for helping my family and my disapproval of what's happening in the country. The election-rigging was a watershed moment. To remain silent after that is a crime. My mother was so upset by my speaking at the demo that she cried, but I felt that I had to honour the democratic values my father stood for."

Sobchak is fast becoming a biting social and political critic. She already has 300,000

followers on Twitter, only three months after launching her account. In a recent video that went viral on YouTube, Sobchak confronted a controversial Kremlin figure in one of Moscow's most expensive restaurants and demanded to know how he could afford to eat there on his meagre salary.

"You are sitting in such a wonderful restaurant with such great prices — look at the menu," Sobchak says in the video with heavy sarcasm. "Look, 1,300 roubles [£28] for a bellini. Fresh oysters, 500 roubles [£10.50] apiece. I can understand why a socialite like me might be here, but you? In a restaurant like this? It's all for the sake of the party, right?"

Sobchak has vowed to stop presenting sultry reality shows and is now preparing a series of internet videos aimed at less educated young Russians, in which she will teach them their basic rights and explain the principles of democracy and free elections. She also harbours strong political ambitions.

"I've always disliked the Paris Hilton label," says Sobchak, who boasts many friends in high places. "I don't regret anything, but it's true that I used to be vulgar and silly. I loved the jet set, the expensive clothes and fast cars, the partying. I wanted money and a life of fun. But I'm older now and want to make a more valuable contribution."

Talk of a Slavic revolution, be it in the streets or behind the doors of power, is deluded. Westerners often forget that only two decades have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a mere blink of the eye in history. Real, deep-seated change will take another generation or two, and Russia remains in many ways a very troubled, dark and cruel land.

Even so, "People like me who have done well under Putin now look around and realise that the air is stifling — we want a more just society," says Sobchak. "There is no turning back. This is not a passing fad. We're seeing the beginning of a new perestroika."

Slowly but surely, the seeds of change are being sown. And the first, early shoots are popping up in the most unexpected of places ■



Mark Franchetti talks about the Russian citizens standing up for the rights at: [thesundaytimes.co.uk/russianprotests](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/russianprotests)