

## Ramping Up Rights for the Disabled in Russia

by *Maria Snegovaya*

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Irina Yasina belonged to the Russian elite for most of her young life. Daughter of a government minister, she was a respected economist and successful politician. She transcended the thick Russian glass ceiling to become head of the department of public communications in the Russian Central Bank and played an active role in formulating Russia's macroeconomic policy. Just a few short years later, however, she lost everything.

After the 1998 financial crisis, Yasina was dismissed from the Central Bank. Vladimir Putin's arrival to power and the shifting elite structure led to the arrest of Michael Khodorkovsky, founder of a philanthropic organization and Yasina's boss. Her association with Khodorkovsky turned from asset to liability overnight. In the midst of these misfortunes, she was diagnosed with an incurable, fast-evolving neurological disease that robbed her of the use of her legs. This young, attractive woman—who had soared to

great heights in chauvinistic Russia—was now an outsider grounded in a wheelchair.

Yet despite this tragedy, Yasina has spent the latter part of the past decade staging a comeback. And she's doing it by fighting for the disabled.

### “DEATH-LITE”

In modern Russia, virtually no facilities exist for wheelchair users. Indeed, Russian society scarcely understands the lack of such amenities to be a problem. The disabled consequently face a tough existence, without the support that they might have taken for granted if they were born in America or Europe. Traditionally, disability in Russia means “death-lite”—ostracism, belittlement, and isolation in one's home because public spaces and attitudes block access and empowerment. Yasina has spearheaded a national movement to change this sad state of affairs.

Her successful public campaigns have included “wheelchair strolls,” in which prominent, able-bodied Russians sit in wheelchairs and attempt to visit museums, cafes, stores, and movie theaters. The participants are often arrested by the Russian police for “traffic disturbance.” These innovative “sit-ins” have succeeded in attracting media and political attention to the problem of wheelchair accessibility.

Yasina's tenacity and conviction earned her an appointment to the Russian President's Council on Human Rights and the Development of a Free Society in 2008. She is presently attempting to introduce Russian legislation that would improve the conditions of the disabled by, for example, overturning a prohibition

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on unaccompanied wheelchair users boarding airplanes.

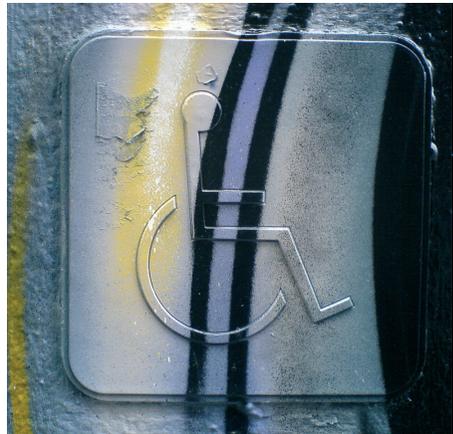
In 2009, Yasina's work helped to convince Moscow authorities to invest in a high school wheelchair-accessible elevator—a modest accomplishment by Western standards but a veritable breakthrough for civil rights advocacy in Russia. She has also fostered a volunteer student movement for the accessibility of public places in Moscow, conducting outreach and organizing numerous charity events across the region.

### RAMPING UP THE FIGHT

Still, a lot of heavy lifting on this issue remains. The Moscow government building, where the medical examination of disabled people takes place, has an entrance with lots of staircases and no ramps. Yasina has chosen, on principle, not to receive her medical checkup there until access to the building improves, and she is therefore still not officially registered as a disabled person. Yasina's peaceful protests have rendered vivid the problem of wheelchair accessibility, laying the groundwork for future advances.

In contemporary Russia, Yasina represents a new kind of personality—actively engaged in real civil work, wielding a measurable impact on public policy. Thanks to her unlikely leadership, the attitudes of Russian society toward disabled people are gradually starting to change.

In today's Russia, many people perceive that they have little control over access to their civil rights. Yasina's campaigns and tremendous personal drive to improve the conditions of the disabled in Russia will serve a powerful lesson for future Russian reformers.



"Wheelchair sign under a fresh coat of paint" © by Flickr user man pikin