

Opposition Leader's Wife Fights Drug Dealing Charges

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Taisia Osipova spending time with her daughter during happier times.

SMOLENSK — In 2003 teenager Taisia Osipova became an overnight celebrity in her hometown of Smolensk when she smacked the governor with a bouquet of carnations to protest his policies.

Fast-forward to this year, and Osipova, now 25 and the mother of a 5-year-old daughter, is on trial on charges of drug dealing.

Investigators say Osipova was caught red-handed and may face up to 20 years in prison for selling heroin. But her supporters call the case a clumsy frame-up aimed at punishing her husband, an associate of outspoken Kremlin critic Eduard Limonov.

Osipova was detained last November after police declared they had found a stash of heroin during a search of her home. Investigators said they received a tip from one of her customers

and bought 3,000 rubles (\$100) worth of heroin from her with marked bills in a string operation.

But Osipova said the cash and the heroin were planted in her house to pressure her husband, Sergei Fomchenkov, a senior member of Limonov's unregistered opposition Other Russia party.

Her belief appears bolstered by the fact that the officers from the police force's anti-narcotics department who searched her house were accompanied by an officer from the force's anti-extremism department, which monitors opposition groups.

Fomchenkov, 38, and his wife met through Limonov's previous organization, the National Bolshevik Party, at whose Smolensk branch Fomchenkov held a senior post until the group was banned as extremist in 2007.

"She was a restless young girl who was attracted by our ideas," Fomchenkov said of his wife in an interview in Moscow, where he works.

She acted on the ideas, too, striking then-Governor Viktor Maslov with flowers during a 2003 public meeting with local religious leaders. "You are getting fat at the expense of ordinary people!" Osipova shouted as she hit the stocky former Federal Security Service official in the face.

The fragrant demarche earned Osipova a one-year suspended sentence on charges of attacking a state official — a punishment that admittedly pales in comparison with what awaits her if she is convicted of drug dealing.

The search of Osipova's private house raises numerous questions.

Police officers moved around the house unmonitored during the November search, Fomchenkov wrote in an open letter posted online in November.

Under the law, police searches have to be conducted in the presence of independent witnesses. In this case, the two witnesses were members of pro-Kremlin youth groups, said Osipova's lawyer Natalya Shaposhnikova.

One witness, Svetlana Seministova, heads the Smolensk branch of Nashi, while the other is an activist with United Russia's youth branch, Young Guard, she said.

"Both belong to political movements, so you can't really call them independent witnesses," she said.

The anti-narcotics officers were accompanied by an officer with the local police force's anti-extremism department, according to a police statement released in November. The officer, Dmitry Savchenkov, in turn, supervised efforts by Seministova, the Nashi activist, to look out for "politically unreliable students" at a local university, Seministova testified at Osipova's trial earlier this month.

Judge Yevgeny Dvoryanchikov rejected a defense request to summon Savchenkov to testify at the trial.

The police statement did not elaborate on why an anti-extremism officer had participated in the search. A spokeswoman for the anti-narcotics department, reached by phone Monday, asked a reporter to call back the next day. On Wednesday she said she was waiting for permission from her superiors to comment on the case and would not put a reporter in contact with anyone else in the department.

Smolensk anti-extremist police did not return repeated calls this week.

Fomchenkov [said](#) the search was carried out after police tried to pressure a family friend into planting drugs and marked cash in the house. He only identified the friend by her first name, Marina, adding that she had rejected the request. Marina accused officers from the Moscow police's anti-extremism department of initiating the crackdown on Osipova, Fomchenkov said.

A spokesman for the Moscow department said he was unfamiliar with the specifics of Osipova's case Monday. He said Wednesday that he could not comment.

While investigators said Osipova accepted 3,000 rubles as payment, only 500 rubles in marked bills were found during the search. Investigators said Osipova ate the rest.

The identity of the purported customer who tipped off the police has not been released, and investigators say she has been placed in a witness protection program.

Fomchenkov said police officers took care to film every nook and cranny of his wife's house during the search, and he believes the footage was used to coach the purported customer on what the house looks like.

"Investigation of this case can be seen as a perfect example of multiple violations of the law," said Shaposhnikova, the lawyer.

A spokeswoman for the district prosecutor's office declined to comment on the case, citing the ongoing trial.

Limonov described Fomchenkov as a "brave man who has made a lot of enemies" and is a "key figure" in the Other Russia party.

"He knows enough about the situation in our organization, and so they want to neutralize him," he said by telephone, without elaborating.

On Limonov's behalf, Fomchenkov applied to the Justice Ministry in December to register the Other Russia as a party. The application was rejected.

Fomchenkov works in Moscow and wanted to bring Osipova to the capital to live with him. But she chose to stay in Smolensk, saying the living conditions were better for their daughter.

"The process reminds me of the theater of the absurd," said Leonid Nikolayev, an activist of the radical art group Voina who came to a May hearing to support Osipova.

Nikolayev himself faces jail time for overturning police cars, some with officers in them, in an anti-government protest in St. Petersburg last year. He and a fellow activist were released

on bail of 300,000 rubles (\$10,700) provided by British graffiti artist Banksy in February. Banksy donated a total of £90,000 (\$146,000) to Voina, and some of the leftover funds have been funneled to Osipova's defense.

Osipova, pale-faced and wearing a tracksuit, sat quietly through the May 3 court hearing. She only broke the silence at the end of the session, when she asked the judge to request the security services to present recordings of bugged phone conversations between her and her husband. She said the phone conversations included a discussion about a possible frame-up by the authorities.

The judge turned down the request, saying the recordings are a "state secret."

"What kind of state secret can a conversation be between a wife and a husband?" Osipova retorted.

The next hearing in the trial, which started in February, is scheduled for June 21 after the judge returns from a vacation. Osipova was refused bail and is staying in pretrial detention.

Her daughter, Katrina, is now in the care of a sister, though relatives say child protection workers have repeatedly threatened to take the child into state custody.

Fomchenkov tried to appear stoic while speaking about his wife's case to *The Moscow Times*. "I think she will become stronger by going through this," he said. "I know her trial will backfire on the authorities."

But after a pause, he lapsed into a more tender and vulnerable tone. "Even criminals didn't touch women and children," he said.

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