

Prisoner at Center of Outcry Beaten

By [Rina Soloveitchik](#)

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Sergei Mokhnatkin's 2009 arrest has become a rallying cry at recent opposition demonstrations, where many have called him a political prisoner. **Igor Tabakov**

TORZHOK, TVER REGION — Sergei Mokhnatkin greets visitors with the warm smile of an old-world gentleman, but it does little to hide the exhaustion on his face.

"I can't sit when a woman stands," he told The Moscow Times recently as he stood up stiffly and politely, revealing his hungry-looking frame.

His well-mannered behavior seemed out of place in the drab visiting room of men's penal colony IR-4 in the city of Torzhok, about 200 kilometers northwest of Moscow.

A month later, his lawyer says Mokhnatkin was beaten by guards who were trying to stop him from filing complaints about goods stolen from the prison school where he worked, [Grani.ru reported](#) Tuesday.

Mokhnatkin had earlier said the chief administrator of the school "worked as hard as he

could," trying to improve the situation in the school, but officials hindered him at every step.

Mokhnatkin said he had tried to help, "but they kept bullying me until I could stand it no longer."

Mokhnatkin's lawyer, Valery Shukhardin, said he did not know the exact details of the attack, but that his client was not badly hurt.

"What exactly happened here is unclear," Shukhardin told Gazeta.ru. "He said he had a bump on his forehead from being hit by one of the staff. Those are his words."

The episode was the latest dust-up in Mokhnatkin's saga from a quiet life as an average Russian everyman to being at the heart of a public outcry, with opposition activists calling his name at the anti-Kremlin rallies that have shaken the country in recent months.

As he seeks to return to the presidency for a third time, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has insisted that Russia doesn't have political prisoners, but many argue that the 57-year-old is exactly that.

In June 2010, Mokhnatkin was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for breaking a police officer's nose during a Strategy 31 rally — named after the article of the Constitution that grants the right to public assembly — on New Year's Eve in 2009 on Triumphalnaya Ploshchad.

The bearded, soft-spoken Mokhnatkin says he was not actually participating in the protest but was just passing by on his way to a party with a friend, when he saw a policeman roughing up an elderly woman and decided to step in.

"A police officer came over to an elderly woman and started to beat her, not just push, but to beat her," Mokhnatkin told Ren-TV, which interviewed him in jail last June.

According to the court sentence, Mokhnatkin head-butted the policemen and broke his nose.

The scuffle and what has happened since has made Mokhnatkin a poster child for abuse in the eyes of opposition activists, who say he is the first person imprisoned due to a Strategy 31 protest, simply for defending a woman.

"The policeman was beating Mokhnatkin, and he went to the prosecutors to complain so a case against him for beating the policeman was opened," said Alexander Romanov, an activist

with the Memorial human rights organization.

Opposition activists and human rights lawyers have written dozens of petitions and newspaper articles arguing that Mokhnatkin should be freed. Two Moscow artists have even made a comic book in his honor.

Posters demanding his release were carried during recent opposition rallies along with Yukos oil company founders Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev. During the December rally on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova, opposition activist Alexei Navalny [mentioned](#) Mokhnatkin's name.

"We have solidarity with Mokhnatkin," Navalny said, mentioning him in the same breath as Khodorkovsky, opposition activist Sergei Udaltsov — who was in prison at that time — and Sergei Magnitsky, a Hermitage Capital lawyer who died in police detention in 2009.

An engineer by profession, Mokhnatkin is a small, stiff man with broad shoulders and a short neck — his body wound tight as if to reveal a rigid character at odds with his current world.

"He is in dangerous opposition to the colony's administration," Valentina Sharipova, a Tver activist for Memorial wrote on her blog after visiting Mokhnatkin together with The Moscow Times.

His fight with the prison's administration started in September 2011, when the court refused to transfer him to better conditions in a settlement, he said.

"They did not even tell me under which circumstances I could get alleviating conditions. That made me really angry," he said.

The conflict escalated when Mokhnatkin began to complain about conditions in the colony and a lack of living space for inmates. He said 34 people live together in just 50 square meters of space.

He wrote to the prosecutor and the court demanding a full-time employment contract — he worked full time in the prison school but got only about 500 rubles (\$16.75) a month instead of the 2,100 rubles (\$71.50) he would be entitled to, Nadezhda Radnayeveva, of the group The Rights of Prisoners, wrote on her blog.

In December 2011, Mokhnatkin went on a hunger strike to pressure the administration, he said. As a result, he was put into solitary confinement for 40 days. He stopped the strike around New Year's when, according to Mokhnatkin, the administration promised to compromise.

When he came out of confinement, his job at the school had been given to someone else who "does not care," Mokhnatkin said. He continued to work at the school on a voluntary basis.

But a source familiar with the situation in prison told The Moscow Times that the trigger for Mokhnatkin's hunger strike was really that someone had stolen a spoon from him and the administration did nothing when he complained.

Mokhnatkin says the colony is governed by the rules of a kind of brutal capitalism.

"If you have money, you 'share' it with the guards, and you are allowed everything," he said.

That became a problem when Mokhnatkin lost his job. He says he now lives on less than 500 rubles a month.

Mokhnatkin's sentence winds up at the end of the year, but the Penal Code allows for a sentence to be prolonged for violations of prison law, of which Mokhnatkin has so far been accused of violating three times.

For the administration Mokhnatkin is too stubborn, for the guards too poor and for his

fellows too much of an intellectual. When he came out of solitary confinement, all his money and documents were stolen.

"I never even imagined that people steal like that in a colony," he said. "I do not think it was like that in the Soviet time — then prisoners had more of a sense of honor and loyalty."

The worst thing, Mokhnatkin says, is being cut off from the world.

"I am used to reading the papers every day, here I have no idea what is going on," he said.

Torzhok prison official Andrei Shmelyov told Ren-TV in June that Mokhnatkin's story was no different than that "of an ordinary Russian inmate."

The Ren-TV report showed Mokhnatkin playing jazz in a prison band and winning a chess tournament, but off camera life is grimmer.

His interest in politics and "demanding" books has won him few friends, he said.

"I don't have friends here," Mokhnatkin said. "My task now is not go insane. I am not afraid of physical violence but of the lack of respect and the psychological debasement."

Mokhnatkin's unbending character stands in sharp contrast to his life. Born to a musical family in the city of Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurtia republic, Mokhnatkin said he wanted to become a diplomat.

"Since I was a kid, I was always eager to know about foreign affairs," he said.

Instead he graduated from one of Izhevsk's defense-industry institutions as an engineer. He taught for a while, but failed to get a Ph.D. and left to go work in the oil industry in the north, but had little success in business.

"He was an idealist and was always trying to show his character. He often said business is not stealing, but he himself was mocked by his partners who left him with no profits," said his friend Sergei Korepanov, a noted pianist who knew Mokhnatkin in the mid-1990s.

Korepanov said Mokhnatkin still owes him a significant sum of money, which he lent to Mokhnatkin while he fought a case in a local arbitration court.

"He is not a crook, that is not about him. I know that he just didn't have that money, otherwise he would have given it back," Korepanov said.

Before his arrest, Mokhnatkin was living and working various odd jobs in Moscow. His last job was as a pizza delivery man.

Those who knew him say women admired Mokhnatkin's charm, but he never settled down. Friendships came and went, and he has not been in touch with his only brother Anatoly for more than 11 years.

Mokhnatkin seems to think that he might have been released under mitigating circumstances if he wasn't made into a political symbol by the opposition and the press.

"If the public and press did not pay attention to me in the beginning, I would not be in prison right now," Mokhnatkin said reproachfully — hinting that he may have wished to have remained invisible.

"I do not want to burden people. I always wanted to achieve and sort out everything myself," he kept repeating during the interview, explaining why he would not take financial help.

Mokhnatkin's stubbornness has left him isolated, activists said.

"He has been left by everyone," Memorial's Sharipova said. "After the colony, he has nowhere to go. And what awaits him after his release is the unknown — no family, no home, no job."

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