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Rights Council Seeks Youth Leader's Ouster

By Natalya Krainova

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The Kremlin's human rights council has appealed to President Dmitry Medvedev to fire Vasily Yakemenko, head of the Federal Youth Agency, over an exhibit at the Lake Seliger youth camp that mocked prominent human rights and opposition leaders.

The appeal, signed by 14 of the council's 35 members, was released on the same day that the council's head, Ella Pamfilova, resigned but is unrelated to her departure, council member Alexei Golovan said Monday.

"The council members who drafted the letter did not know about the resignation. These were two independent processes," said Golovan, a former children's ombudsman for Moscow.

The letter came after young people at the Lake Seliger camp, sponsored by Yakemenko's agency, staged an exhibit last month that featured portraits of veteran human rights campaigner Lyudmila Alexeyeva and opposition leaders Eduard Limonov and Boris Nemtsov,

among others, mounted on stakes and wearing hats with swastikas.

Council members said Yakemenko sanctioned the exhibit.

"Today they impale photos; tomorrow they will impale heads," Kirill Kabanov, a member of the council and head of the National Anti-Corruption Committee, told The Moscow Times.

The letter said "public rudeness" had been "openly permitted against those who defend ... citizens' rights," according to a copy posted on the web site of Rights in Russia, a human rights group.

The letter said failure to dismiss Yakemenko would mean that his agency's "deliberate policy to disregard basic constitutional values, to bring about a new isolation of Russia from the civilized world" was supported by the authorities.

A spokeswoman for Yakemenko, Kristina Potupchik, said her boss would not comment on the council's letter because "he doesn't want to."

A secretary for Natalya Timakova, Medvedev's spokeswoman, asked for a written inquiry, which went unanswered Monday.

Pamfilova, who had headed the council since its inception in 2004, gave no reason for her resignation Friday, but she told Novaya Gazeta in an interview published Monday that a police crackdown on opposition protesters and criticism of federal ombudsman Vladimir Lukin, who asked for an investigation into the crackdown, had contributed to her desire to quit.

Pamfilova also said she hoped that her departure "would move the authorities to enlarge, strengthen and develop the democratic component," without which "modernization is impossible."

Vedomosti reported Monday, citing an unidentified source close to the Kremlin, that Pamfilova had quit under pressure from Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's first deputy chief of staff.

Pamfilova was widely seen as a lone critical voice in the Kremlin, while Surkov and his protege Yakemenko are known for promoting a pro-government ideology and campaigning against the political opposition. Surkov oversees the activities of the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi, formerly headed by Yakemenko.

Nashi threatened to sue Pamfilova in July when she accused unspecified pro-Kremlin youth of burning books.

Surkov attended the Seliger camp and told the members of Nashi — which was initially created to combat political opposition — that "the war goes on," Izvestia reported last week.

Kremlin bureaucrats have blocked the presidential human rights council's initiatives for months despite Medvedev's support for the council, the Vedomosti source said.

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