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Why Medvedev Backed Down on Khimki

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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President Dmitry Medvedev's decision to intervene in the conflict over the Khimki forest and temporarily halt the deforestation connected with the construction of a new Moscow-St. Petersburg highway was the biggest political news of the past five years.

Ever since 2005, when mass protests forced the government to cancel the monetization of benefits for pensioners, high-ranking authorities have never agreed to reconsider their decisions — even in cases when the demonstrations were on a much larger scale and when their decisions were far worse. For example, the authorities refused to back down from a decision to impose exorbitantly high import duties on used Japanese cars, dealing a heavy blow to the thousands of Russians in the Far East who depend on this industry. Nothing has been able to influence the government's position — not a series of public protests in Vladivostok, nor convoys of protesting drivers in Moscow and other cities, nor protest campaigns waged on the Internet.

It would be naive to believe that protests alone compelled the government to make concessions on the Khimki forest. But a new factor in the equation is that people not

previously affiliated with politics have joined the fray. The Khimki conflict does not fit into the usual paradigm of protests pitting the Kremlin authorities against the implacable opposition.

In addition to Yevgenia Chirikova, leader of the Khimki forest preservation movement, music critic Artemy Troitsky, rock legend Yury Shevchuk and the country's environmentalists have no direct connection to opposition groups. On the contrary, they tend to disassociate themselves from them. But the official propaganda immediately labeled all defenders of the forest as enemies of the regime.

It might have been the outrageous campaign that the state-controlled media waged against Shevchuk and Troitsky that played a crucial role in the outcome of the conflict. The attacks leveled against them were so absurd and so overblown that they clearly discredited the government's position. The unprofessional and irresponsible actions of the Kremlin propagandists and spin doctors reached such a scale that they became a liability to the authorities themselves.

It was at this point that the authorities apparently became concerned. The decision to temporarily stop the deforestation of the Khimki forest came off as a public slap in the face by the government to its own over-eager employees.

For all of the clamor over the Khimki conflict, it remains largely a local issue. But at the same time, it does reveal a nationwide problem. Opposition leaders had hoped in vain that the people would lose faith in the ruling regime because of the wildfires and other crises. But something happened that was even more dramatic and more serious for Russia: The government began to lose faith in itself — or at least, in its own bureaucrats.

In the aftermath of Medvedev's decision on the Khimki forest, the real question is how the authorities will now be able restore faith among their supporters — both within and outside the government.

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