

Bad Acting

By [Kirill Kabanov](#)

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The collapse of corrupt business groups has led to an interesting phenomenon. When wealthy businessmen with close ties to the ruling kleptocracy fall from favor, they start complaining that they are victims of illegal takeovers and that they had actually been engaged in human rights activity and charity. But what they refer to as “charitable” activity is actually the siphoning of funds out of the Russian economy through the use of corrupt mechanisms in democratically successful European countries and the United States.

These countries have formed the opinion that Russia commits systemic human rights violations and has a corrupt judicial system controlled by the authorities. So wealthy businessmen have begun to compare themselves to former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky or former Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky to avoid being charged with fraud, embezzlement or other forms of corruption — despite having profited from the very system that they now claim is oppressing them. Imagine if one year from now Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi announced that he had been persecuted as a champion of human rights and his property had been unlawfully seized. That is roughly what State Duma Deputy Ashot Yegiazaryan is doing now, after having quietly moved himself and perhaps most of his assets

to the United States.

In Russia, Yegiazaryan has been charged with abusing his office for personal gain, and the case was greeted positively at home as an end to deputies' immunity before the law. The case also demonstrates that many wealthy businessmen serving as Duma deputies do not actually perform the functions of elected representatives but receive — or more often purchase — their office and violate the law by continuing to actively pursue their business interests. During any Duma session, two-thirds of the seats are typically vacant because their occupants are too busy making money hand over fist.

Major business players such as former Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and his billionaire wife, Yelena Baturina, have portrayed themselves as victims of a regime opposed to their anti-corruption and human rights stance, apparently in order to gain residency in a cozy foreign country that actually believes all of that nonsense.

Yegiazaryan, unlike Luzhkov and Baturina, responded to allegations against him by sending an open letter to The Moscow Times — not to a Russian publication. Unfortunately, many Russians are unfamiliar with this newspaper: It targets English speakers working in Russia and is very likely read by the staff of the U.S. Embassy. Does Yegiazaryan really believe that he can neutralize criticism directed at him by human rights groups through this simplistic approach? He might wonder, "Why should they care if I call myself a defender of human rights? There should be enough room in this party for everyone."

The answer, Mr. Yegiazaryan, can be summed up in a single word: reputation. Human rights activists earned their reputation over the course of many years. These are people who stood up for their principles at the risk of confrontation with criminals and state authorities, people who fought corruption without making billions of dollars in the process.

My colleagues in President Dmitry Medvedev's Human Rights Council, headed by Mikhail Fedotov, decided not to enter into polemics with the likes of Yegiazaryan. We simply issued a public statement assessing Yegiazaryan as an individual while not linking him with the human rights movement. But in light of his statements, we have been misled in our understanding. Therefore, I will consult with my nongovernmental National Anti-Corruption Committee to obtain additional information about his activities, and we will share our findings with all pertinent state agencies in Russia and abroad.

As for Yegiazaryan's alleged charitable activities, the Novaya Gazeta newspaper has exposed these claims as false.

About two months ago, Yelena Panfilova, head of Transparency International in Russia and a fellow member of the Human Rights Council, told me: "The people who pulled billions of dollars out of Russia, some by criminal means, will attempt to retain their money and comfortable lifestyles by beating their chests and claiming to be opponents of the regime, even while sipping a mojito in a Miami villa."

I don't think most people are so naive as to believe such a charade. It might be possible to convince Russian society that an alleged criminal is a benign philanthropist, but countries with developed democracies have established systems that protect the public interest from these kinds of acts. Yegiazaryan's performance is just bad theater.

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