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Yakemenko Blames Medvedev For Rallies

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Last month's large anti-government protests were triggered in part by President Dmitry Medvedev's failure to live up to his words, the founder of the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth movement said in a rare interview published Tuesday.

"Much has been said about freedom and little has been done in recent years," Federal Youth Agency head Vasily Yakemenko told the Lenta.ru news site.

He said the protesters' main motive was not so much to protest alleged fraud in the State Duma elections but to protest Medvedev's decision not to stand for re-election. "These people realized that they no longer have a leader they can count on," he said.

Yakemenko is widely reviled among opposition members for organizing fervently patriotic youth movements directed against them. In 2005, he became the first federal commissar of Nashi, an organization seen as a Kremlin attempt to prevent a replay of Ukraine's Orange

Revolution in Russia. He became the youth agency's head in 2007.

In the interview — the first that Yakemenko has given to a liberal media outlet in recent memory — he openly confronted Medvedev and the ruling United Russia party, but he was careful not to criticize Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"The [protesters] did not reject Putin but a cultural group called United Russia," he said, adding that the Duma's three minority parties were intimately linked to the ruling party. "From my point of view, LDPR, A Just Russia and the Communists are part of the bigger United Russia," he said.

The view that the Duma minority parties are "systemic" and largely compromised by cooperating with the Kremlin is widely held by the country's nonparliamentary opposition, whose marginalization is one of the tasks that Yakemenko is believed to have carried out.

Yakemenko also said Putin was in a difficult position because he could not ignore the protesters — "not because they take to the streets, but because these are creative, energetic and intelligent people."

Yakemenko's job may be in jeopardy after his patron, Vladislav Surkov, was demoted to deputy prime minister for modernization and culture last month. Surkov had been the Kremlin's top ideologue and was widely seen as the brains behind Nashi and similar movements like Young Guard and Young Russia.

Asked whether he expected to keep his post after Surkov's removal, Yakemenko said he was 100 percent confident that he would not last as agency head, not because of Surkov but because at 40 he was too old.

He said, however, that it was too early to leave. "I won't resign before the political situation is stabilized," he said.

Yakemenko stressed that none of the youth organizations associated with him had offered any resistance to the sanctioned protests on Dec. 10 and Dec. 24, which he described as "a civilized request for change by a segment of society."

But the organizations did hold rallies in support of the Kremlin in the first week after the Dec. 4 elections and hundreds of Young Russia members confronted protesters at an unsanctioned rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Dec. 7.

Yakemenko conceded that his work at the agency was "not the most effective" and openly blamed differences with the Kremlin. "I did not manage to convince the country's leadership to invest significant money into the youth," he said.

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