The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Government 'Funded' Liberal-Leaning News Site

By Alexander Bratersky

May 22, 2012



Photo blogger and failed Omsk mayoral candidate Ilya Varlamov **Vitaliy Ragulin**

The former head of the Federal Youth Agency said Tuesday that the government has financed a liberal-leaning news outlet founded by Ilya Varlamov, one of the country's most popular bloggers.

The claim by Vasily Yakemenko, a staunch supporter of President Vladimir Putin and the founder of the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group, casts a dark cloud over the Ridus news site, which Varlamov has touted as an independent news source of "civic journalism."

Varlamov, who recently called off a shortlived bid to run for Omsk mayor, said he would leave Ridus if the claim proved true, according to a post on his Twitter account.

Yakemenko announced his participation in Ridus — whose rented office in the Tupolev office plaza costs 6 million rubles ($200,000) per year, according to market estimates — in an

interview with pro-Kremlin television pundit Sergei Minayev on a live Internet broadcast. Yakemenko did not say how much money he had spent on the news site.

The development did not surprise some observers, who have long suspected that Varlamov is close to powerful government officials such as Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, who is believed to have masterminded the creation of Nashi when he served as Putin's deputy chief of staff in the Kremlin. Fueling suspicions was the online appearance of an e-mail exchange, purportedly between Varlamov and Nashi spokeswoman Kristina Potupchik, that appears to show Varlamov accepting 400,000 rubles ($13,600) for writing blog posts looking flattering to the Kremlin.

Varlamov has refused to discuss the e-mail exchange. He also denied any connections to Surkov in a recent interview with The Moscow Times.

Varlamov, whose photo blog is consistently among the 15 most popular blogs, according to a Yandex ranking, has denied being an opposition activist, even though he has received support from anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny.

Fortifying his opposition-minded image, Varlamov this year joined the new League of Voters, a public group created by novelist Boris Akunin and journalist Leonid Parfyonov to monitor elections. He also is known as a freelance photographer with almost exclusive access to various political events.

Independent analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said Yakemenko's revelation served as a warning to Varlamov. "It says: 'Do not get out of control,'" he said.

Varlamov mounted a mayoral bid in Omsk but canceled it early this month after he failed to collect the required 10,000 signatures.

Yakemenko, for his part, announced plans this week to create a political party of young, middle-class voters. He said the party would be built on the foundation of Nashi, known for its harassment of opposition leaders and opposition friendly foreign diplomats.

It was unclear whether Yakemenko might use Ridus as a future media tool.

Among other things, the site offers a wide collection of breaking news photographs that other news organizations are invited to use at no cost. The Moscow Times has published Ridus photos on its website.

The ownership of the site, meanwhile, has been taken over by KamAZ, RIA-Novosti reported, citing the Tatarstan-based truck maker. KamAZ is owned by Kremlin-connected Russian Technologies, and its other partners include Germany's Daimler and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/22/government-funded-liberal-leaning-news-site-a14949