

Yakemenko's Departure Signals End of Era for Youth Politics

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Nashi founder Vasily Yakemenko, center, at the Seliger youth camp, which took heat for its overt political tone. **Igor Tabakov**

Vasily Yakemenko, the founding father of the controversial pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi, is out as head of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev removed Yakemenko at the youth leader's request, according to an order posted Wednesday on the government's website.

His departure may close the book on an era in which youth groups functioned as a political force.

Yakemenko had announced earlier that he would step down to concentrate on leading a new political group called the Party of Power, which he created with the Kremlin's blessing.

'Nashi Is Finished'

In a recent interview with The Moscow Times, Yakemenko indicated that his departure marks the end of an era for Nashi, which was notorious for hounding opposition leaders.

"The Nashi project is finished, and I can say that with pleasure," Yakemenko said late last week.

He also said the project "started to make serious mistakes" soon after he formally stepped down as head of the organization in 2007.

Yakemenko began getting involved with youth groups in 2000 with the organization Moving Together.

By 2005, it had morphed into Nashi, which was formed as a Kremlin response to youth organizations in Serbia and Georgia that took an active role in Western-backed anti-authoritarian revolutions.

Pavel Salin, an analyst at the Center for Current Politics, believes that Nashi was created to dilute opposition rallies with a flood of young Kremlin loyalists, but the measure has since proved ineffective.

"Authorities have instead relied on hired hands," Salin said.

Nashi's annual summer camp at Lake Seliger, set up to offer lectures on technological innovation and other subjects to thousands of youngsters, caught flak for its political tinge.

At Seliger 2010, members of Nashi's radical wing, Stal, displayed portraits of opposition leaders' heads mounted on stakes and sporting hats with swastikas.

Some of Yakemenko's loyalists, including Nashi spokeswoman Kristina Potupchik, have joined Yakemenko's new project, an indication that Nashi's days as a Kremlin-funded group might be numbered.

Fear of the Opposition

A recent meeting with allies of opposition leader Alexei Navalny left Yakemenko with a bitter feeling.

"They've told me they're going to imprison people close to Putin, including me," Yakemenko said. "If people say, 'We're going to throw you in jail,' who'd give them power?"

A source with ties to the opposition movement recently told The Moscow Times that Yakemenko is among several politicians who would be punished if the scales of power tipped in the opposition's favor.

"If those people don't understand that in our country we shouldn't destroy one another, then it'll remain a matter of who is stronger," Yakemenko said.

Yakemenko recently announced that he had asked associates at the KamAZ truck

manufacturing facility to help fund photojournalist Ilya Varlamov, a popular member of the opposition-minded blogging community.

“I thought of him as a bright representative of civic journalism,” Yakemenko said of Varlamov.

But helping Varlamov is not likely to win Yakemenko the hearts and minds of the opposition, many of whom view him as a bitter enemy.

Rift in the Kremlin

“For many years, my task was to prevent an Orange Revolution. Today, it is a new aristocracy that threatens our sovereignty,” Yakemenko said.

He was referring to the ruling United Russia party, led by Vladimir Putin while Putin was prime minister and now chaired by Medvedev.

“The ruling class is not producing anything,” Yakemenko said. “While once this group resolved issues, now it is just doing harm. Today, no one can say where we are headed and why Putin has become the president for a third term.”

Yakemenko said a resolution of the current political crisis would depend on the president.

“He has to address those people who come to protests,” Yakemenko said.

Asked if he sees a rift forming within the Kremlin, Yakemenko said “there must be one,” and he said the creation of his own political party is evidence of that.

Yakemenko’s new Party of Power, which he is soon planning to register with the Justice Ministry, has gotten the green light from the Kremlin.

“Before, members of the elite couldn’t understand that someone could declare a political position that differs from the status quo and not be punished,” he said.

Protest Opportunity

Yakemenko said he wants to take advantage of the growing protest movement.

“This is a conflict between the new aristocracy and the so-called people of the future,” Yakemenko said. “There is a need for a leader who can assume power for those people.”

He named a former Nashi patron, former Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov, among those “people of the future.”

Surkov, who was behind the creation of Nashi, is currently a deputy prime minister in Medvedev’s government.

Yakemenko said that although he discussed his party plans with him, Surkov told him that he doesn’t get involved in politics anymore.

Before his removal from the post of deputy chief of staff, Surkov spoke positively about the

creative class, which took part in opposition protests in December.

Yakemenko is currently traveling around the regions to gather the required number of members to form his new party.

Accusations

In 2010, Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin barely survived a beating by thugs outside his apartment building. Kashin later accused Yakemenko of involvement in organizing the attack.

Yakemenko denied the accusation and said Kashin should ask Medvedev about the case's progress.

While president, Medvedev publicly promised Kashin that the attackers would be punished, but the case remains unsolved.

In 2010, Vedomosti reported that Yakemenko had close ties to an organized criminal group that was involved in several killings.

Members of that group founded the Akbars firm in Naberezhniye Chelny, Tatarstan. Yakemenko was listed as a co-founder.

That gang was allegedly disbanded in 2006, when several of its members received lengthy prison terms.

Yakemenko's office initially said his passport data had been stolen and used against his will to found the company.

But Yakemenko later acknowledged that he worked with the founders of Akbars while he was a dealer of KamAZ trucks, which are produced in Naberezhniye Chelny.

He pointed out, though, that he knew the Akbars founders in 1994 and that they were arrested only years later.

Yakemenko still enjoys a good relationship with KamAZ, which is now owned by Russian Technologies, a firm controlled by the powerful, Kremlin-connected businessman Sergei Chemezov.

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