The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Dissenting United Russia Member Faces Expulsion

By Jonathan Earle

August 27, 2012



Valery Fedotov speaking on the subject of youth politics at a St. Petersburg forum in 2010.

The only United Russia official to publicly call for Pussy Riot's release said he won't give up his post or party membership, days after his superior called for his ouster.

Valery Fedotov, head of the party's Vasilyevsky district office in St. Petersburg, blamed the scandal on a personal vendetta against him and vowed to continue to "speak the truth."

In blog posts and media interviews in recent months, Fedotov has also called for a major overhaul of the ruling party, which he characterizes as bureaucratic and undemocratic.

Although Fedotov is a low-ranking figure, his statements represented rare public dissent in a party whose members typically toe the party line in public.

Pundits said Fedotov's criticism had probably won him more enemies than friends in United Russia, speculating that he would neither keep his post nor inspire a wider revolt in the party.

Friday's written rebuke by St. Petersburg party boss Dmitry Yuryev appeared to bring an end to Fedotov's summer of defiance, which included several blog posts and an appearance at an opposition-sponsored forum at which he called United Russia "a nationwide laughingstock."

But what appears to have incensed Fedotov's superior most of all was the claim, repeated several times, that Russia is mired in a "cold civil war."

"[Mr. Fedotov] has gone beyond civilized, mainstream politics. With this statement, he's placed himself along a multitude of of brazen and marginal rabble-rousers," Yuryev wrote in a stinging article posted on the ruling party's website.

Yuryev dismissed Fedotov's criticism of the party as self promotion and wrote that Fedotov's continued leadership of the Vasilyevsky district party was "unacceptable."

His superior's demand that Fedotov leave his post appeared to demonstrate the party's unwillingness to tolerate fierce public criticism from within its ranks.

The spat reached a stalemate on Monday, when Fedotov not only refused to back down, saying Yuryev held a grudge against him, but also issued a counter call for his boss to be fired.

"To banish the only rough-and-tumbler capable of earning the title 'only honest United Russia member' ... is to bury society's hopes that the ruling party can change," he wrote on his blog.

United Russia has the most seats of any party in the State Duma but saw its support drop by 14 percent in December's parliamentary elections, to just under 50 percent, after opposition parties waged an aggressive campaign against it, including by labeling it the "party of crooks and thieves." Critics said the vote was marred by massive vote rigging in favor of the ruling party.

When Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev took over as party head in May, he proposed democratizing the party's system for choosing its leadership but did not call for other major reforms.

Fedotov, 42, joined the ruling party in 2009 and assumed his current position within six months of becoming a member.

He made waves by appearing at an opposition event in St. Petersburg called "White Forum" earlier this month, where he told the audience that United Russia had "turned into a nationwide laughingstock" over the past year because the party bureaucracy wasn't able to change with the times.

In an open letter posted on his blog in late July, he called for the release of the three arrested members of Pussy Riot and encouraged other United Russia members who shared his opinion — " a majority," he said — to join him.

The three women were sentenced earlier this month to two years in jail for a February performance denouncing President Vladimir Putin in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Political analysts described Fedotov as a lone wolf in a party of conformists, and said that

although his "mutiny" might reflect real dissension in the ranks, it would not spark an all-out rebellion.

"Party functionaries get a job. They get a paycheck. They get to be part of the elite. It's not easy to give these up and join the opposition," said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies think tank.

Fedotov said on his blog that he'd received an "incredible" number of letters, phone calls, and blog comments, including from United Russia members, in support of his position.

But Pavel Salin, an analyst with the Center for Current Politics, characterized his dissent as a "one-man revolt" that posed no serious risks to the party.

As an example, Salin cited problems United Russia faces in Smolensk, where he said a weakening in the party center has sparked conflicts among local party elites.

Both agreed that Fedotov would likely lose both his party job and his party membership, a position strongly implied in Yuryev's statement.

"As for his membership in the party, that's a question for Valery Fedotov's conscience, and of the patience of his fellow party members," Yuryev wrote. "But I'm afraid that Fedotov no longer has a conscience, and there are limits to the patience of local party members."

The fate of Fedotov's party membership could be decided as early as Sept. 5, local media reported.

Related articles:

- The Laughingstock of the World
- 2 Pro-Kremlin Officials Stand Up for Pussy Riot
- Why Pussy Riot Is Scarier Than a Nuclear Attack

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/27/dissenting-united-russia-member-faces-expulsion-a17318