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A Senseless Abduction in Kiev

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Opposition activist Leonid Razvozzhayev's luck failed him twice. The first came when he was kidnapped in Kiev by Federal Security Service agents, brought back to Moscow and tortured into incriminating himself. The second is that his troubles began several weeks after the Pussy Riot affair had peaked: Western public opinion cannot follow two foreign scandals simultaneously, and mounting a campaign to support various political prisoners at once is difficult. The result is that some jailed Russians have become international celebrities, while many others are either unknown or have been forgotten by the outside world.

But the situation with Razvozzhayev is far more scandalous than Pussy Riot. The charges against him are based on hidden-camera footage of opposition figure Sergei Udaltsov and a Georgian diplomat engaged in a rather rambling conversation in Minsk. The only thing Udaltsov was guilty of in that encounter might be excessive braggadocio, and as far as I know, that is still not considered a crime in Russia. If it were, more than one senior official would be at considerable risk.

In any case, it remains a complete mystery why Udaltsov is free and his associate, Leonid

Razvozzhayev, is sitting in jail.

There can be no reasonable justification for abducting Razvozzhayev from a foreign country, and it's obvious that kidnapping is a far more serious crime than having a conversation with a Georgian diplomat.

Razvozzhayev is not important enough to have been targeted for strictly political or national security worries. Bureaucratic concerns were most likely behind it. Perhaps someone staged this "bust" to impress his superiors, or to use up monies allocated for covert operations by the end of the year to receive more funding for next year. How else can you explain the decision to fly Razvozzhayev back to Russia on a private jet?

The abduction in Kiev shocked the Moscow intelligentsia, who now sincerely believe that anyone can be arrested at any time and for any reason. But those fears are unfounded. Nothing drastic will happen — at least not until the new federal budget is approved.

Meanwhile, government officials should give serious consideration to the fact that they are becoming hostages to decisions being made at fairly low levels. One group carries out a kidnapping, but a different group must deal with the political consequences.

What's more, if the abduction of Razvozzhayev did not create the storm of indignation in the West that it deserves, it was only because those countries were too preoccupied with the Pussy Riot affair and Ukrainian politicians were so focused on pre-elections rivalries that they missed a chance to exploit the scandal to their own advantage.

Even if the authorities managed to pull off such a stunt once, there is no guarantee they can do it again without paying a heavy political price. More important, such actions are not characteristic of a strong state, but of a weak government — one that cannot control its own intelligence agencies or adhere to a coordinated and well-considered political agenda, taking actions that make sense over the long term.

Nobody knows what to do with Razvozzhayev now. The authorities feel compelled to keep him in custody, but convicting him on trumped-up charges would risk inciting an even worse — and more important, senseless — scandal.

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