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Editor and Deputy Trade Blows Over 'Insulting' Article

By Jonathan Earle

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Isayev, in glasses at left, participating in a demonstration with trade union members in central Moscow on May 1. **Igor Tabakov**

A highly public spat between a prominent lawmaker and a well-connected newspaperman about "political prostitution" and threats against journalists reached new heights on Monday, with both turning to the government to punish the other.

The squabble came amid mounting allegations of impropriety against several strident pro-Kremlin lawmakers, which some experts have seen as evidence of a power struggle between liberals and conservatives within the ruling United Russia party.

It also brought new attention to the lawmaker, State Duma Deputy Andrei Isayev, 48, a former leftist who in recent months has distinguished himself as one of the Kremlin's loudest supporters, earning contempt and special scrutiny from government critics.

The argument between Isayev and Pavel Gusev began on Friday with an article in Gusev's Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper titled, "Political Prostitution Changes Its Gender," which accused three female United Russia deputies of tailoring their political ideas to please the Kremlin.

It described deputies Irina Yarovaya, Olga Batalina and Yekaterina Lakhova as political "kept women," saying they are ready to "go to bed" with any party, a suggestion Isayev ruled "insulting to women" and deserving of "harsh retaliation" against the author, he wrote on Twitter on Saturday.

‘I’m confident that they’ll explain to Gusev that it’s a crime to publicly insult women.’
Andrei Isayev
State Duma Deputy

The remark sparked an uproar in the media community in Russia, which is recognized as one of the most dangerous places to be a journalist, having seen dozens beaten or killed since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Gusev, head of the Public Chamber's media committee, on Monday asked Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin and Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to open a criminal case into the Twitter messages, which he said obstructed the lawful activity of a journalist, a crime punishable by up to six years in jail, Gusev wrote in letters published on the chamber's website.

Isayev said he was "pleased" by Gusev's requests and would insist that a court rule on their merit. "I'm confident that they'll explain to Gusev that it's a crime to publicly insult women and citizens," he wrote on his Twitter blog on Monday afternoon.

His colleague, Deputy Sergei Zheleznyak of United Russia, went further, asking the Federal Consumer Protection Service to check whether the article violated media laws against defamation based on gender, and proposing new disclosure requirements for the Public Chamber.

The new rules, to be tacked onto a bill that's already passed its first reading, would require Public Chamber members to disclose income and expenses, thereby ensuring that the advisory body "perfectly reflects public opinion" and that its members do not lobby for private commercial interests, he wrote in articles published on the ruling party's website.

The proposal was greeted with derision by at least one Public Chamber member. Yelena Lukyanova, a lawyer who sits on the media committee, said she was not afraid of revealing her finances but the requirement was far outside international norms.

"Some countries, like Latvia, require all citizens to declare income and expenses. Some require just civil servants to file reports. I'm not aware of a third option," she said

by telephone on Monday.

She disagreed that the article was insulting to women, as did Grigory Yans, the Moskovsky Komsomolets freelancer who wrote the article and said in a telephone interview on Monday that he criticized the women as politicians, not as women.

Yarovaya, a former senior member of the West-leaning Yabloko party, was a co-author of a new ban on U.S. adoptions, ostensibly in the name of orphans' safety after a string of abuse scandals and 20 confirmed deaths out of 60,000 children adopted by Americans in the last two decades.

The move was widely seen as a response to a U.S. law calling for sanctions against Russians suspected of human rights abuses.

A scathing expose published in the New Times magazine earlier this month claimed that Yarovaya, head of the State Duma's Anti-Corruption and Security Committee, had failed to declare a multimillion-dollar apartment that was purchased in her daughter's name when she was still a minor.

Political analyst and outspoken Kremlin critic Stanislav Belkovsky said the information about the apartment was probably leaked by liberal members of the ruling United Russia party, many of whom are unhappy about the ban and other initiatives pushed by Yarovaya's conservative wing.

Isayev on Monday offered a different explanation for the Moskovsky Komsomolets article, calling it a "political hit-job" aimed at women pushing a ban on advertisements for sexual services, he wrote in an article on the ruling party's website on Monday.

"Unfortunately, Isayev is slowly going crazy," Gusev said by telephone. "These women have never fought against advertising sexual services," he said, adding that on Monday he would asked the Public Chamber to help him fight against the advertising.

Isayev, once a trade unionist with social-democratic and anarchic leanings, has been recently criticized for failing to declare a hotel that his wife owns in Germany. He said in March that his wife was prepared to sell the hotel, but some experts said the scandal was likely to cost him his seat.

Media analyst Alexei Pankin dismissed the quarrel between Isayev and Gusev, who is said to be "well-connected," as a lot of hot air. "It's nothing special, just an ordinary squabble," he said by telephone on Monday, while Yans said he thought the scandal would blow over in a matter of days.

Asked whether he felt as if his life were in danger, Yans chuckled.

"Isayev isn't a soloist at the Bolshoi Theater. He's not going to pay somebody splash acid in my face," he said.

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