

Innovative Russia

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Skolkovo Foundation president and multibillionaire Viktor Vekselberg recently announced that the foundation would sue State Duma Deputy and opposition leader Ilya Ponomaryov. Vekselberg said Ponomaryov might have acted in bad faith when he earned \$750,000 from work he was contracted to perform for Skolkovo in 2010-11.

The contract Ponomaryov signed with Skolkovo is a murky document. For example, as part of his duties to "attract innovation," Ponomaryov promised to deliver 10 lectures on innovation at a price of \$30,000 each. Pretty nice dough, considering that even Nobel laureates don't earn that much money for a single speaking appearance. Furthermore, two

of his "lectures" lasted under 20 minutes each and there is no indication that he ever delivered the remaining eight. Yet that did not prevent Ponomaryov from collecting his \$300,000 fee.

At the same time, however, Ponomaryov has been working in the IT business since he was 14 years old and was already one of Russia's most successful IT professionals by the time he went into politics. He created the IT system for Yukos, once Russia's largest oil company, and later directed all of the IT projects for former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. After Khodorkovsky's arrest, Ponomaryov became vice president of IBS, Russia's largest IT company.

Specialists of his caliber regularly pull down salaries of \$750,000. In short, Ponomaryov is worth however much Skolkovo was willing to pay him.

But why was his contract formulated in such a strange way, offering a generous "lecture fee" rather than a straight salary? It was probably an attempt to minimize taxes. Ordinary income tax is three times higher than taxes on lecture fees.

Although I defend his background as a pre-eminent IT specialist, I am not especially fond of Ponomaryov as an opposition figure. I consider him to be one of the most unpleasant of them all.

Unlike many other opposition figures, Ponomaryov maintained close ties with former chief Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov, the architect of the "managed opposition" project. Since Surkov is a more influential figure in the Skolkovo project than even Vekselberg, I am guessing that Ponomaryov's cushy Skolkovo contract might have been part of an inside deal he struck with Surkov.

I paid close attention to Ponomaryov's behavior following the December 2011 protests. First, he suffered from delusions of grandeur. He ran to leading opposition figures Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov with offers to "create a triumvirate to lead the opposition."

Then it was announced that elections would be held to form a Coordinating Council of opposition forces. Ponomaryov initially supported the idea, but when he realized he might not be elected, the millionaire innovation guru baked up a ridiculous scheme to undermine the process: He refused to pay the 10,000 ruble (\$320) registration fee in the hope that his name would be stricken from the list of candidates. That plan was foiled when opposition leader and socialite Ksenia Sobchak called his bluff and paid the fee for him.

The fact that Vekselberg is suing Ponomaryov only provides further proof that there will be no innovation coming out of the Skolkovo project. After all, who in their right mind would ever work with Vekselberg or any other Skolkovo leader knowing that one day they can pay you handsomely for your work, and the next day, bowing to pressure from the authorities, sue you for fraud and demand you return all the money and pay damages?

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