

Long List of Suspects in Yakunin Hoax

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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Russian Railways CEO Vladimir Yakunin speaking to reporters about rumors of his dismissal at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on Thursday. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin on Thursday attributed rumors of his voluntary resignation to a fight for control over large-scale projects of his company.

But experts said Yakunin may have angered regional authorities by receiving huge subsidies for his agency and failing to significantly improve railway services.

According to other versions, the rumors could have been aimed at discrediting Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's government or Yakunin's rumored replacement, his deputy Alexander Misharin.

A report circulated late Wednesday from an email account resembling that of the government press service saying that Yakunin had been replaced by his deputy, Alexander Misharin, but Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova later denied that report.

Yakunin, speaking to Interfax on Thursday, called for legal amendments and actions by law enforcement agencies to prevent similar cybercrimes in the future.

Several senior State Duma deputies were quick to voice support Yakunin's idea, including Irina Yarovaya, head of the Duma's Security and Anti-Corruption Committee, and Vladimir Pligin, head of the Duma's Legislation Committee, both members of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

"This provocation shows that there are people who would like to plant doubts about the feasibility of these [Russian Railways] projects, or to take part in them out of their own selfish interests," Yakunin told Interfax on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on Thursday.

Yakunin cited the development of high-speed trains and the Baikal-Amur Mainline and the Trans-Siberian Railroad among his agency's large-scale projects, adding that there were other similar projects as well.

Russian Railways' major projects include the already announced and approved trillion-ruble project to build a high-speed rail line from Moscow to Kazan.

Another project is last year's purchase of 75 percent of shares in French logistics operator GEFCO. In addition, the company plans to create a joint venture between Russian, Belarussian and Kazakh state railways, to which Russia would contribute the assets of the country's largest intermodal container operator, Transcontainer.

"There are a lot of questions about whether each of these projects is economically feasible," said Alexei Bezborodov, the head of the Infranews transportation research agency.

Merging TransContainer, which has "a more or less established operation, with the Belarussian and Kazakh assets," he said, would "create chaos" on the market, and "it goes against the plans of the whole container business in the country."

Other Russian companies in the container business would have to completely re-write their business plans, he said.

The expert also said, however, that the container operators were mostly independent companies, and it is unlikely that they could have planned a joint attack on Yakunin, though the rumors could have come from elsewhere for similar reasons.

Yakunin told journalists outside the St. Petersburg forum Thursday that he did "not exclude" that the media attack on him could be linked to the privatization of TransContainer.

Meanwhile, Yakunin announced another large-scale project of Russian Railways at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on Thursday: plans to buy assets in Greek state transportation companies using loans, Interfax reported.

According to Olga Mefodyeva, a senior analyst at the Center for Political Technologies, a smear campaign has been going on for months in the mass media against Yakunin, whose company receives "unprecedented" subsidies from the federal budget but is not "showing very remarkable results."

Episodes of the smear campaign included a recent [report](#) about Yakunin's luxurious country house in early June, complaints by railway workers in February about pay delays and [job cuts](#), and a November broadcast of radio host Sergei Dorenko accusing Yakunin of aggravating the financial condition of his agency, Mefodyeva said.

"Some groups are implementing a policy of compromising Yakunin's reputation," Mefodyeva said by telephone. "The faults in the activities of Russian Railways speak in their favor," she said.

Sources in the industry were doubtful that the media campaign could have begun within the monopoly, however, saying the choice of candidate for the new president was too strange.

"The one who is really in charge of operations in Russian Railways is first vice president Vadim Morozov, not Yakunin or Misharin, so it would have been logical to appoint him as the new leader," a source said.

Mefodyeva said the rumors of Yakunin's resignation could have come from either his opponents, who wanted to inform the railways chief of his looming dismissal, or by his supporters, who wanted to ensure that he did not lose his position for another several months because authorities would not "take their lead from rumors."

But Alexander Kava, an independent railways expert, said the media attack on Yakunin could have originated in the White House because the railways chief is an outspoken opponent of the monopoly's privatization.

"Those who support the privatization of Russian Railways want to see less influence of the government in the rail sector and more benefits for private rail operators," Kava said by telephone.

So far, Yakunin has been successful in defending [his agency] against the pressure of the privatization lobby in the government," he said.

He also said that the privatization of Russian Railways could throw the entire rail industry off balance because private operators only want to skim the profits of the business and leave its low-revenue segments to the government.

Opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny on Wednesday suggested that Yakunin was actually expected to be fired but that the railways chief had apparently managed to "run up to" President Vladimir Putin and "surprisingly, keep his position," he wrote on his Livejournal blog.

Navalny was referring to the conflicting reports about an alleged meeting between Putin and Yakunin. Yakunin's press secretary, Alexander Pirkov, told Interfax following reports of the railways' chief's dismissal that Yakunin was actually in a meeting with the president, but the president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax that there was no such meeting.

Navalny also said that his Foundation to Fight Corruption had prepared several complaints against Yakunin but had not had time to publish them.

"But now since old man Yakunin has made our work relevant again, we will continue,"

Navalny [wrote](#).

Yakunin's lawyer, Alexei Melnikov, told legal news agency Rapsi on Thursday that rumors of the official's resignation were "revenge" by RSN radio political talk show host Sergei Dorenko, whom Yakunin is suing for [libel](#).

A policeman brought a court summons to Dorenko on Wednesday, interrupting his live show on RSN radio, [Rapsi reported](#).

Dorenko must appear in Moscow's Khoroshyovsky District Court on July 1 to face libel charges for accusing Yakunin of "worsening the financial state" of Russian Railways on his live program in November, Yakunin's lawyer told Rapsi.

Dorenko refuted Melnikov's accusations of being behind the rumors, suggesting that the rumors were in fact aimed at "discrediting" Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's government and First Deputy Prime Minister and Russian Railways vice president Alexander Misharin, Dorenko told [RIA Novosti](#).

Incidentally, [Uralpolit.ru](#) reported on Wednesday night that Misharin confirmed his appointment.

"Yes, you can congratulate me," Misharin allegedly told Uralpolit.ru. Misharin later [denied](#) speaking to Uralpolit.ru.

Railway workers met the news of Yakunin's dismissal with cheers. Most entries on the [Railway.kanaries.ru](#) professional forum urged readers to go out and celebrate.

"It's too bad I quit drinking three years ago, but I am with you guys anyways, bottoms up!" one user wrote. Spirited remarks gave way to grave disappointment, however, as it turned out that the information was false.

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