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A Yakunin Scandal About Nothing

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Boris
Kagarlitsky

The whole thing started with revelations about a mansion allegedly belonging to Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin. Then came the fake letter about his resignation that made the rounds among government officials, reminiscent of the largely forgotten episode in French history when Claude-Francois de Malet falsely reported that Emperor Napoleon had died in Russia and seized control of Paris for two hours. The current incident also lasted two hours, during which everybody was convinced that Yakunin had been sacked and Alexander

Misharin appointed to replace him. Even Misharin believed it. The main difference between the two incidents is that Malet was shot for his crime, and the prankster behind the Yakunin hoax has not yet been found.

The deception was carried out flawlessly. The fake message was sent from an official address and written on a flawless-looking official government form. Whoever was behind the ruse must have had help from senior officials, especially because the Internet campaign against Yakunin began even before this episode.

The prelude to the current scandal came when photos of the mansion reportedly belonging to Yakunin were posted on the Internet, and bloggers claimed it had cost a whopping $75 million to build. But when real estate professionals later assessed the price at closer to $13 million, nobody paid any attention.

The desire to exaggerate the sins of an opponent is understandable, but it often produces the opposite results. For example, serious historians are well aware that about 8 million people died during Josef Stalin's rule. But it is common to hear people say 60 million people were killed. The result is that what starts out as a tragedy ends as a farce, and the average person finds it difficult to believe anything he reads or hears on the subject.

Video clips were circulated on the Internet that claimed to show ties between Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich and Dagestani bankers convicted on corruption charges. As the unofficial leader of the liberal faction in the government, Dvorkovich is an outspoken critic of those advocating a moderate course and continued state involvement in the economy. Yakunin has traditionally been considered a key member of that group. It is easy to guess that the latest scandal was just the latest round of infighting between rival ruling clans who slug it out on the Internet.

The information war is taking the place of meaningful discussion and disorienting citizens with the use of ridiculously inflated figures. But what can be achieved by such methods? Anyone who believes that social evils can be eradicated through misinformation is sadly mistaken. And if this is how rival clans compete for power, how is one clan any better than the other?

What's more, the public gleans little useful information from these scandals. The rival groups are not battling over ideology or principle but privilege and power. We devote little attention to the problems connected with the privatization plan Dvorkovich advocates, and there is still no serious discussion on the worsening condition of Russia's railways.

Everybody already knows that it costs less to buy a vacation home in Western Europe than in a wealthy Moscow suburb. But nobody is ready to discuss the underlying reasons for Russia's outrageous market prices and what they might lead to in the future. Rather than examining the larger trends and forces affecting society, bloggers are waging attacks against specific individuals in the mistaken belief that they alone are responsible for all of Russia's problems.

Boris Kagarlitsky is the director of the Institute of Globalization Studies.

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